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COBALT-SERIES

マリア様がみてる

くもりガラスの向こう側

今野緒雪



集英社

Volume 23

Other Side of the Frosted Glass

Prologue

"Gokigenyou."

"Gokigenyou."

The clear morning greeting travels through the serene, blue sky.

Today, once again, the maidens that gather in the Virgin Mary's garden smile purely to one another as they pass under the tall gateway.

Wrapping their innocent bodies and souls is a deep-colored school uniform.

Walking slowly so as to not disturb the pleats in their skirts, so as to not toss their white sailor scarves into disarray... such is the standard of modesty here. Running here because one is in danger of missing class, for instance, is too undignified a sight for students to wish upon themselves.

Lillian Private Academy for Women.

Founded in Meiji 34, this academy was originally intended for the young women of nobility, and is now a Catholic academy of prestigious tradition. Placed in downtown Tokyo, where you can still see traces of Musashi Field's greenery, it is protected by God, a garden where maidens can receive tutelage from preschool to university.

Time passes, and even now, in Heisei, three era-names past Meiji, it is a valuable academy, where nurtured ladies raised in greenhouses are shipped out in carefully packaged boxes after 18 years of schooling - an arrangement that continues to survive.

It looks like it's cold outside.

The countless droplets of water clinging to the inside of the glass window attest to that.

The difference between the outside and inside temperature has changed the transparent glass into white frosted glass.

If there were someone standing on the other side of the glass, I'd probably be able to see their vague outline. But I wouldn't be able to make out their facial expression.

Even though I'd know there was definitely someone there, they could be laughing or crying. No matter how hard I stare, I wouldn't be able to tell.

Even though I'd want to know. There's no way to do so.

I hear you say that, as a practical matter, it could be solved immediately by wiping the glass, right?

In that case, please tell me.

How do I wipe away the cloudiness fogging up the heart's window?

Onee-sama's Lead

Part 1

The day of the second-term closing ceremony.

The Yamayurikai member's Christmas party had been held in the Rose Mansion. The Bûche de Noël, made by Shimako-san following Rei-sama's instructions, was really good.

Even though it had all been new to the Rose families' guests, they had all enthusiastically participated in the various games and enjoyed the silly banter.

Truly, she had expected she would still be enjoying herself when the curtain fell on the party, trying to drink it all in.

However.

Some sort of madness had flung Yumi into the depths of the abyss. No, perhaps she had unwittingly thrown herself down there.

All because of a single sentence she'd directed at Touko-chan back then.

"Yumi-chan, w-what happened!? Huh, Sachiko too!?"

Rei-sama was the first to call out when the door opened.

"What on earth – "

Followed by the seldom seen sight of Shimako-san looking surprised.

"First of all, you should come inside."

"Right. Neither of you are wearing your coats and it's freezing out here. How long have you been like that?"

Noriko-chan and Yoshino-san. In her foggy brain, Yumi clearly noted each of her friends as they appeared in succession. They were distinct but somehow distant. It was just like watching a scene in a TV drama.

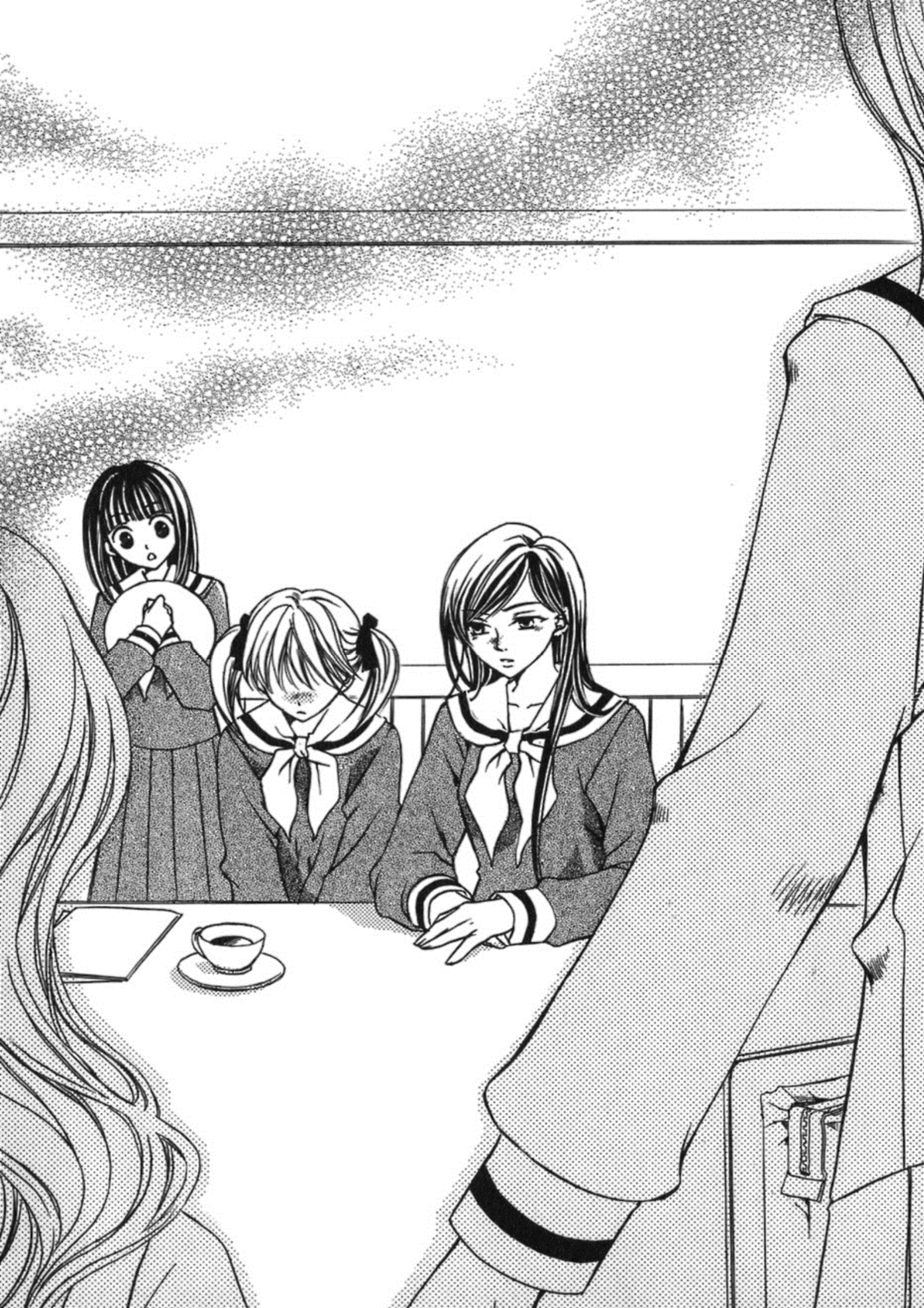
That's how it went.

That evening, as the Red Rose soeurs clung to each other and sobbed, their friends noticed the disturbance and quickly ushered them back into the Rose Mansion.

"... Here you go."

Noriko-chan placed a hot cup of tea down in front of them. It looked to be freshly prepared, even though they'd largely finished tidying up after the party. She heard Yoshino-san remarking to Shimako-san that it was a good thing they hadn't emptied out the kettle yet. Rei-sama was back in the room. Tsutako-san and Nana-chan were still there as well.

"Sorry for making you worry."



Sachiko-sama was the first to speak. Yumi followed her onee-sama by simply bowing her head, to indicate that she felt the same. She couldn't speak just yet. She felt that the tears which had finally stopped would come flooding back if given the slightest chance.

"It's really not a big deal."

Apart from her red eyes and nose, Sachiko-sama looked as dignified as ever as she prefaced her explanation with that statement.

"Yumi offered her rosary to Touko-chan."

At which point everyone cried out, "Wha!?" simultaneously. It was clearly not the reaction of people who had heard something that was "not a big deal."

"And was refused."

"_"

There was no shouting this time. But neither was there dead silence, nor a "whuu" or "haa," instead there was the hard to represent in words sound of multiple overlapping intakes of breath.

They were two female high-school students that had been sobbing, not babies or toddlers, so everyone must have expected there was a reasonable explanation, but it still seemed to be quite a shock for them to actually hear it.

"That's all."

After Sachiko-sama's concluding remarks, Noriko-chan quietly mumbled, "No way."

"Noriko. Be careful what you say."

Shimako-san cautioned her, like a rebuke.

"Ah, sorry. I didn't mean that Rosa Chinensis wasn't telling the truth."

Noriko-chan explained, and Sachiko-sama smiled at her.

"I know. You were simply trying to say that it seems unbelievable, right? But, it's the truth."

The truth. Yumi closed her eyes and chewed on that phrase.

In any event, Touko-chan had refused the rosary that Yumi had offered her. No matter how she tried to spin it, that "truth" would not change.

"There isn't really much to report, since, in the end, she was refused. But seeing how worried you were, I thought it was better to tell you. Besides, there's something I'd like to request of all of you."

"Request?"

Everyone other than Sachiko-sama, including Yumi, looked confused.

"That's right, a request. Could you please leave the matter between Yumi and Touko-chan alone for a little while?"

"Leave it alone ... ?"

Rei-sama asked, acting as their representative.

"Don't commiserate with Yumi or criticize Touko-chan. Please just watch over them from a distance. Because this is their problem."

"Don't commiserate with Yumi-chan or criticize Touko-chan?"

"Of course, I'll be doing the same too."

Sachiko-sama announced, and Rei-sama laughed.

"Well if that's what you're doing as her onee-sama, then we couldn't possibly butt in."

When she'd finished laughing, she looked at the others and said, "Alright?"

"Understood."

Yoshino-san and the White Rose soeurs agreed, as did Tsutako-san and Nana-chan. Leaving aside Tsutako-san for now, while Nana-chan may not have fully grasped the situation, she probably couldn't say that it had absolutely no relevance to her future.

"We don't need someone who would turn down Yumi-san."

Yoshino-san cried out. Her expression was angry but there was a little glimmer in the corner of her eyes. Rei-sama said, "Enough," and pressed her cheek against her petit soeur's face. Even though she'd agreed with what Sachiko-sama had said only moments ago, Yoshino-san couldn't stop herself from saying it.

"Surely."

Shimako-san said quietly.

"You haven't given up, right Yumi-san?"

Yumi nodded languidly.

That's right.

Sachiko-sama had said to "watch over them" because this wasn't over yet.

They all finally started to get a move on when the patrolling security guard came by and urged them to hurry on home.

They formed a number of loose, flowing groups and walked along the gloomy ginkgo tree-lined path. There had been something of a solemn atmosphere as they closed up the Rose Mansion, but now there was bright laughter bursting out here and there.

But this in no way meant that they'd all completely forgotten that Yumi had been rejected by Touko-chan. This was fully understood by Yumi.

At her grandfather's funeral, when the old men that were her grandfather's friends paid their respects, they said, "He hated being morbid, you know," and laughed. It felt incredibly similar to that.

They were forcing themselves to laugh and create a cheery atmosphere. So Yumi laughed too.

Because her feelings weren't dead yet. She couldn't be disheartened.

When they stopped to pray at the statue of Maria-sama, Yumi prayed for Touko-chan.

– That Touko-chan wasn't crying.

Not that they would become soeurs. But that she wasn't crying.

Yumi had such good friends beside her. But right now, Touko-chan was all alone.

Earlier, she would have walked this path alone.

There were surely plenty of people that cared for Touko-chan, but there wouldn't be anyone near her now that would call out to her and make her laugh.

Throughout this, Yumi felt the warmth of her onee-sama's hand.

This was probably why she couldn't shake the feeling that Touko-chan was hurting much more than she was.

Part 2

Three days later, a written invitation arrived.

She spotted the unusual sight of a letter addressed to her amongst the letters she took out of the post box. Wondering who it was from, she flipped it over and written there as the sender's name was "Ogasawara Sachiko."

Now that she'd seen that name, there was no way she could wait until she got back to her room. She took the scissors out of the drawer above the shoe rack, then, taking care not to damage the contents, Yumi opened the letter from her onee-sama and read it where she stood.

Like a few-days-late Christmas card, the message in the red envelope was word processed and simple, like so:

We're holding a women-only New Year's Party. Please join us, if you feel so inclined.

When: From Noon on January 2.

Where: The Ogasawara Residence

What to Bring: Sleepwear, any food or drink you'd like.

* The plan is for an over-night event, but you're free to arrive late or leave early.

"A New Year's Party at Sachiko-sama's house."

From memory, it was on the second of January this year that the former Rosa Gigantea, Satou Sei-sama, had tricked her and dragged her along to Sachiko-sama's house.

Every year, Sachiko-sama's father, Tooru-oji-sama, and grandfather were out of the house on the second day of the year, so the house staff were given the day off too. Thinking that Sachiko-sama and her mother, Sayako-oba-sama, might be lonely by themselves, they'd barged in to liven the place

up. Although Sei-sama probably hadn't anticipated Kashiwagi-san having the same thoughts and beating them there.

Sei-sama had told Yumi that she should go and visit them from time to time after she'd graduated. So maybe it would have been better if Yumi had gone out on a limb and asked Sachiko-sama, "Is it alright if I come and visit during New Year's?"

But she hadn't been thinking that clearly recently, due to the shock she'd received.

Still. What kind of a pathetic petit soeur would she be if she needed someone to force her to go to her onee-sama's house to offer a New Year's greeting? Although this time she was taking advantage of the invitation extended by Sachiko-sama. She had to be more proactive.

"Even so."

Yumi smiled at the words "women-only," and felt relieved. Since it seemed that Sachiko-sama was going out of her way to let her know that her rival, Kashiwagi-san, wouldn't be coming.

"But still ... "

Why such an impersonal invitation, like for a school reunion? If she was just inviting Yumi, a single telephone call would have been better –

Yumi put the invitation back in the envelope as she walked back to her room. She glanced at the telephone in the living room on her way past, and as she did it started ringing, like it'd been aiming at her.

"Hello."

She said, picking up the receiver in disbelief.

"Ah, Yumi-san?"

"Huh?"

Naturally, Sachiko-sama would never talk in such a casual manner. However, that "Yumi-san?" was in a voice she heard all the time.

"... Uh, this is the Fukuzawa household, right?"

The person on the other end of the phone line corrected themselves.

"That's right. And you must be Shimazu-san, no?"

"Wha~at. For a moment I thought it was your mother and I panicked."

Correct, that was Yoshino-san.

"You know how your voice always sounds a bit different over the phone."

Yoshino-san laughed it off, sounding a bit embarrassed, before she said, "By the way," and jumped into the main topic.

"I got a letter from Sachiko-sama."

"Ah. Now I get it."

Yumi said.

"What, what do you get?"

"Sachiko-sama sent a written invitation to everyone."

With the same contents. Yumi finally understood why the invitation had seemed so impersonal. Sachiko-sama was the type of person who would have handwritten an invitation if the situation had been different.

"You're going, right Yumi-san?"

"Yep. Although it's only just arrived, so I haven't asked my parents yet. But that's the plan."

"Then I'll go too."

"Really?"

Before she could ask, "What about the marathon?" Yoshino-san said:

"Since I went to Hakone to watch the marathon relay at the start of the year, it feels like I've beaten that demon – I don't have the cravings to watch it. Well, even if I hadn't beaten that demon, if I had to choose between the Hakone marathon and a New Year's party at the Ogasawara house, I'd probably pick the New Year's party."

"What about Rei-sama?"

"Why wouldn't she be going?"

"She's studying for exams, right?"

"Well, by that reasoning, what about Sei-sama last year?"

"Mmm."

Still, the counter-example to "that reasoning" was Mizuno Youko-sama, who'd been in the same position last year and hadn't been able to attend because she'd been taking a prep course over the winter break. Incidentally, Torii Eriko-sama would have been in the same position with regards to entrance exams, but she'd spent her time relaxing in Hawaii.

So then, which type was Rei-sama?

"Well, Rei-chan can do whatever she wants. But since it'll be my first visit to the Ogasawara estate, I'll have to ask her all sort of questions – like how to get there, or what to bring."

"Hahaha. I don't know if that'll help or not."

"Count on it. Well then, see ya."

"Yeah."

Hanging up the phone, she suddenly laughed.

She absentmindedly thought that it had been one year since then. She didn't know whether she should prefix the "one year" with "only" or "already."

She put the handset back and took a single step towards the staircase before the phone started ringing again.

It was probably Yoshino-san. But it felt a bit soon for her to be calling back to give an update if Rei-sama had just arrived home. It was so fast that she must have pressed the redial button immediately after hanging up.

"Hello."

Yumi answered the phone, thinking that Yoshino-san might have forgotten to ask something.

"Ah, is this the Fukuzawa household?"

"Yes."

She heard a composed voice, completely different from the one a while ago.

"I'm Lillian's Girls Academy high school second-year Toudou Shimako and – "

"Shimako-san!?"

"Yumi-san? Gokigenyou. Is now a good time to talk?"

It was rare for her to get a phone call from Shimako-san, but Yumi immediately knew the reason behind the call.

"Actually, I've received a letter from Sachiko-sama."

Part 3

Yumi's parents gave her permission to attend the Ogasawara's New Year's party surprisingly easily, given that she'd intruded on them for New Year's this year (although that was almost a year ago so it felt more like last year) and visited their holiday house.

It was after the Fukuzawa family dinner.

"Still, I feel guilty that we're always the ones imposing on them. Why don't you invite Sachiko-sama around to our house next time?"

Her mother said while wiping down the dinner table, then added, "Although it's a bit small," at the end. But since Sachiko-sama didn't really like her overly large house, she'd be fine in that regard. Sachiko-sama had once told her that she longed for a home where she would know where the rest of her family was. Although if she were to tell her parents that, they wouldn't believe her and say, "She's just being humble."

"Hey, you know you can't come, Yuuki."

Clearing the chopstick holder and nabe pot stand, Yumi called out to her brother who was walking ahead of her, carrying the nabe pot to the kitchen. Incidentally, tonight's main dish had been oden.

"Why? Because I went last time?"

Yuuki looked back at her.

"Yeah ... something like that."

Sort of. She was just a bit concerned that it might follow the same pattern of events as last year.

"I won't go."

Yuuki suddenly laughed, temporarily setting the earthenware pot down on the gas range.

"I only went because Kashiwagi-sempai forced me to accompany him there."

Yumi's heart went "thump" when she heard the name "Kashiwagi" mentioned. It wasn't the usual heart flutters that were implied by that

phrase, just a simple "thump." It didn't go as far as a "stab," but it was basically a light "stab."

As her rival for Sachiko-sama, Yumi had various thoughts about Kashiwagi-san. But right now, the thing that most stuck in her mind was the promise he made about the Touko-chan incident.

(If you ask me about it again, I'll answer you.)

Remembering this, her heart went "thump" again.

But whether it was a "thump" or a "stab," if Yuuki noticed he'd surely be suspicious. Consequently, Yumi put the chopstick holder and the pot stand back in their positions and said, "I know," then left the kitchen with her back still turned to her brother.

However.

"I wonder if Kashiwagi-san will be there as well."

She returned to the living room where her mother was waiting with starry eyes. Apparently the conversation between the two children had reached her ears.

"I'm not sure ... "

Yumi could only offer a vague answer because she really didn't know, but her mother stubbornly persisted.

"He's Sachiko-sama's cousin, right?"

Oh boy. For various reasons, Kashiwagi-san had been visiting the Fukuzawa house quite frequently of late, and her fad-following mother had become quite taken with him.

"But Kashiwagi-kun's a man."

Her father muttered disinterestedly, his eyes fixed on the newspaper's TV listing.

"The New Year's party is supposed to be women-only."

Despite seeming disinterested, her father had fully grasped the contents of the written invitation. Women only. That was quite important.

"Then I suppose they might have invited Touko-chan?"

Touko-chan. That name made Yumi's heart go "thump" too. She hadn't yet told her family about Touko-chan's refusal.

Touko-chan had said, "Your family talks about everything, Yumi-sama," but there were some things that were surprisingly hard to discuss.

"I don't know. Sachiko-sama may or may not have asked her."

"Honestly, Yumi-chan, you really don't do any intelligence gathering, do you?"

Her mother said, "You're her little sister." Sure, she might have been Sachiko-sama's little sister at school, but it wasn't like they lived together, so there were things she wasn't informed of.

"It was a written invitation, so we haven't talked yet."

She'd spoken to Yoshino-san and Shimako-san on the phone, but not yet with her onee-sama.

"Huh, why not?"

"Well, I thought I'd reply over the phone after I got permission from you and dad."

"Don't you think you're being a bit too serious, Yumi-chan? Say, are you feeling alright?"

"..."

Her mother was worried that she was being too serious. Yumi headed to her room, thinking that her parents were a bit off-kilter. Well, maybe it was because she'd been raised by parents like them that she became the daughter she was.

"She's fine. Although I have my doubts about a high school student who can only use the phone with their parents' supervision too. Yumi's different."

Yuuki surreptitiously advised their mother, seeing Yumi grab the extra handset before she headed up the stairs.

Indeed. It wasn't a secret phone call, she just wanted to be alone, with no-one around her, when she made it. But it was a bit annoying that her brother had seen through her like that.

When she got back to her room she called the Ogasawara's house and Sachiko-sama answered.

"I thought I'd get a lot of telephone calls today."

Ah-hah. Since the invitation should have been arriving about now, it looked as though she'd been prepared for people ringing to accept or decline, or ask any other questions.

"Rei called me a little while ago, to say that she and Yoshino-chan were coming. It looks like they've had enough of Hakone."

So the topic of Hakone had come up between Sachiko-sama and Rei-sama, just like it had with her and Yoshino-san. New Year's for Yoshino-san was watching the marathon relay. Because it had such a huge impact, everyone seemed to have input that as an annual event, even if she'd only gone once to see what it was like.

On that note, summer for Yoshino-san was climbing Mt. Fuji. Same thing as above.

"So, how about you, Yumi?"

Asked by Sachiko-sama if she'd attend, Yumi gave a big nod, still gripping the handset tightly.

"Of course I'll be there."

"I'm so glad. Just for you, I gave serious thought to crossing out "if you feel so inclined" and writing "no matter what.""

Sachiko-sama laughed splendidly over the phone.

Just for you, no matter what, she said.

Just for you. Just for you. Repeating this over and over in her mind, Yumi blushed on her own. It looked as though making the call in her room had been the right decision after all.

After discussing a couple of things related to the event, Sachiko-sama said:

"I sent an invitation to Touko-chan too."

Since she was completely unprepared for this, when Yumi heard Touko-chan's name her heart responded with a "thump" once more.

"... Is that so?"

Yumi mumbled. She thought that Sachiko-sama might start to worry if she remained silent, since she couldn't see her face over the phone.

"It was my own decision. I'm sorry I didn't inform you earlier, Yumi."

"No."

On reflection, this was probably something she wanted to ask about far more than what to bring, or how to get to Sachiko-sama's house from the train station.

"She might not come."

"Yes."

"But even so, I thought it was better to invite her. You may still be suffering some shock from the rejection, but I felt that if we did nothing then Touko-chan would gradually drift further and further away."

Indeed. Given how harshly Touko-chan had spoken, it seemed unlikely that she would take any action. Even if they didn't end up as soeurs, Yumi felt they'd both be worse off if they remained apart like this.

By retracting the soeur offer, perhaps she could build a healthy relationship with Touko-chan, like she currently had with Kanako-chan. Although now that she'd realized her feelings, it was incredibly sad to think that she'd never call Touko-chan her petit soeur. But it was much better than keeping her back turned to her.

Not giving up was important, but sometimes, after considering the other person's feelings, giving up was the more meaningful choice.

But even so, come on, onee-sama.

"Are you shocked? Because I asked everyone to watch over you from afar, but I was the first to meddle."

Sachiko-sama said, like she was reading Yumi's mind.

"Are you a mind-reader too, onee-sama?"

"I'm not a mind-reader. But, I am your onee-sama."

Onee-sama.

"So it's okay, for me."

To meddle. What she was saying was unreasonable, but it was said with such self-confidence that it was strangely persuasive.

Yumi giggled.

Saying that it was okay.

Just for her onee-sama.

The Whole Year

Part 1

She gave her room a spring clean, helped her mother out a little bit with the New Year's cooking, checked the TV Guide for the New Year's specials and in no time at all it was New Year's Eve and her father was slurping soba noodles as he watched the annual Red and White New Year's singing contest.

Even if she was carrying some unfinished business in her heart, at midnight that night it was as though the reset button was pressed across all of Japan and the new year arrived.

"Happy New Year!"

Her father spoke over the top of the countdown program announcer on the TV, saying, "Tape, tape. Bring me a piece of tape about 10cm long." The new year brought a new lucky direction that the protective talisman had to face, and to make sure it didn't fall down it was held in place from above with tape. It was bad luck to stick the talisman back up again after it had fallen down. Her father stood on a stool, holding the talisman up with his right hand as he reached down with his left.

"Coming right up."

Yuuki cut a piece of tape from his roll as he answered. Even though he could have just used the serrated edge attached to the tape holder, he always made a point of cutting it neatly with scissors. His reasoning was, "If this is going to be the sash that wreathes the talisman of an unimaginably powerful god, then it's better to make the ends straight."

It was probably because of his methodical nature that their father made Yuuki his assistant. Incidentally, Yumi had been involved a bit earlier when she'd played the role of the guide, standing back from the wall and looking from the talisman to the compass and giving directions like, "A bit to the left."

Despite these sort of involvements with the Shinto gods, the eldest son and the eldest daughter of the Fukuzawa family had attended a Buddhist and Christian school, respectively, since they were young.

Now then. With the talisman hanging safely, the whole family could finally say, "Happy New Year."

Aunt Taeko's family weren't going on a vacation to Hawaii this year, so there was no talk of both parents going to Yamanashi as their father handed out the New Year's gifts.

"Let's make this year a good year too."

The amount inside the decorative envelope was the same as last year, but they weren't too disappointed because they'd been informed of this ahead of time by their mother. Well, it wasn't as though the amount went up every year. It had gone up by a bit last year to emphasize their entrance into high school.

Tomorrow, or, rather, the morning a few hours from now, started for them at 7. So after saying goodnight to their parents, the two children headed towards their rooms on the second floor.

"I kinda feel wide awake."

Yuuki said, stopping in the middle of the stairway in front of her.

"Oh, you feel that way too, Yuuki?"

She'd felt a bit drowsy when some unknown singers had been performing enthusiastically during the New Year's singing contest, but she'd pushed past that and was now completely awake.

"Yeah. I guess I'll play a game or something until I get tired."

Her brother occasionally seemed like an old man, but when he had time to waste he liked to play video games like a normal high school boy.

"But you know, they say you should start the year the way you intend to spend the whole year. If you start off just playing games, how will you be if you get addicted and that's all you do for the whole year?"

In the past, Yumi used to spend New Year's morning reading manga comics, but her now deceased grandfather had warned her that, "You'll be

addicted to them for the whole year." Ever since then, she'd paid particularly close attention to how she spent January 1st.

"Addicted to games? That'd suck. In that case, watching TV downstairs is out too."

He could have just laughed off the superstition but her earnest younger brother gave it serious consideration, standing in the middle of the staircase. Although since she was stuck behind him, Yumi would have preferred that he'd at least finished climbing the stairs first.

"Hey, Yuuki."

She was about to tell him to do his thinking in his room, but Yuuki raised his head.

"I know. I'll head out for a bit."

"Head out?"

"For a walk. Just around the neighborhood."

He begged her pardon and squeezed past her down the stairs. She obediently let him pass but then thought better of it and followed after him.

"So you're going to spend the whole year going for a walk?"

"It'll be good for my health, don't you think?"

Probably. There was no need to worry though, it was different to a game in that no-one ever became obsessed with going for a walk.

"Wait, I'll go too."

Yumi grabbed her brother's elbow. But Yuuki immediately rejected this.

"No way, you're a girl."

"No fair."

"Huh."

"It's fine for a boy, but not for a girl. That's not fair."

The Fukuzawa family had a policy of gender equality. Yuuki was fully aware of this too.

"Let me tell you, it's not sexual discrimination."

"I know. You're just worried about me."

"That's right."

Yuuki shook free of his sister's hand.

"But it annoys me. I know it's different, but it still really annoys me."

As she was saying this, Yumi vaguely realized that her annoyance wasn't just directed at not being able to go for a walk in the middle of the night.

Even though she realized it, she couldn't stop herself. It was troubling that she was bothered by such a small matter.

If she kept going on about how annoying it was, it would probably get her brother down too, so he agreed to let her come along with some conditions attached.

"... You can come if you get permission from mom and dad."

So it looked like Yuuki would have gone out without saying a word if it was just him. If their mom and dad then found out about their thoroughly good son's excursion they'd probably just forgive him immediately. There were benefits to being a boy after all.

The lights in the living room were already off. When she reached her parents' room, her father was in the middle of changing into his pajamas and her mother was rubbing hand cream into her fingers.

"You'll be with Yuuki?"

Their eyes met for a moment. Ooh, that was a good response. Since it was the sort of situation where they might just say, "No," without listening.

As she'd expected, her father frowned as he spoke.

"Be back by one."

"Alright!"

Yumi thought that, in this case, they were relying on Yuuki. They believed that, if push came to shove, he would protect his older sister. Of course, it went without saying that this wasn't permission for them to go out at night any time, as long as they were together. Today was special because it was the first day of the new year.

"Back by one. That's only 30 minutes."

Yuuki said, his face plainly showing that this was a hindrance. Apparently he'd been somewhat expecting their parents to talk her out of it while he'd been waiting at the entrance.

"We're just going around the neighborhood, right? Thirty minutes should be more than enough."

"But still."

He'd said it would be just around the neighborhood, but it looked like her brother had been planning on going further afield.

"Well, can't do much about that. We've got thirty minutes, so we'll just go around the neighborhood."

They put on their coats and then set out carrying only their house key.

The night air was cold and stung her exposed flesh, but she could tell that it was clear air she was breathing in.

As they walked the residential streets she completely lost track of what time it was.

There were still quite a few houses with light leaking through the windows.

There weren't a lot of people walking the streets, but there were more than she'd expected.

"They're going to visit a shrine."

Yuuki said, pointing at the young couple walking in front of them.

"A shrine visit? How can you tell?"

"The guy's carrying a ceremonial arrow."

Then, in that case, wouldn't they be returning from the shrine instead of going to it? Yumi asked this and Yuuki explained that each year people would take their old one as an offering when they bought a new one, so they carried them both ways. His reasoning was that there was a Shinto shrine not that far away in the direction they were going, whereas there wasn't one anywhere near as close in the opposite direction.

"A shrine visit, huh?"

"Ah, it's no good. We'd never make it back by one if we followed them."

"I wasn't really going to suggest that."

Although she had briefly considered it. It'd be really bad if she was back late after pushing hard for permission to go on this late night outing. Nothing she could do about that. She'd have to make do with just a walk around the block after all.

As she was walking along, looking up at the sky, she saw a star speed past.

"Did you see that? Hey, did you see that?"

Yumi pointed up at the sky and her brother said, "What?"

"A shooting star, a shooting star. I guess you can still see them even in Tokyo."

She was so excited she slapped Yuuki's arms.

"It's because the air in Tokyo clears up during the New Year's break. Still, I guess it's good that you saw it, Yumi."

"It's not good. I forgot to make a wish."

If you mentally recite your wish three times before the shooting star disappears, it will come true. Although, as you'd expect, that was impossible. But it happened because of the difficulty, or so the theory went.

"Do you have a wish?"

Yuuki asked.

"Well."

She was a teenage girl. She had all sorts of wishes.

– And then.

"Are you fine with anywhere?"

"Huh? Anywhere?"

"For a shrine visit."

Her brother said, "Come with me," then after walking for about ten minutes something unbelievable was waiting for them at their destination.

"Oh oh oh."

She cried out, without thinking. In the winding alley between two houses, there was a small shrine.

"How did you know about this place?"

"I found it ages ago, when I was riding around aimlessly on my bike. So I guess you didn't know about it then, Yumi."

"Yeah. Even though it's right in our neighborhood."

Passing under the red torii gate, they came to a small altar about 30cm wide and tall.

"Ah, we should have brought some money to offer."

She couldn't see an offertory box, but there was a bit of a depression at the front of the altar where a couple of coins had been left. They could have been from an earlier visitor, or perhaps they'd been there since last year.

"We did."

"Huh. Don't tell me you're talking about our New Year's money?"

Since they'd gone out before she made it back to her room, Yumi had her New Year's money in her coat pocket. But she wasn't generous enough to leave a note as a money offering.

"No, you idiot."

Yuuki reached into his jeans pocket, pulled out a coin and offered it to Yumi, saying, "Here, five yen." Like the five yen of fate. No, in this situation, that was irrelevant.

"..."

With the coin still resting atop his palm, Yuuki said:

"Don't tell me that this is unfair too."

"I won't."

She'd only ever carried money in her purse, be it coins or notes, so carrying money in a pocket was a bit of a novelty to her. But now that she thought about it, her father often took coins out of his pockets too. It just confirmed that Yuuki was a boy.

"Thank-you. I'll pay you back when we get home."

"I'm more than happy to just give you the five yen, but you'd rather make the offering with your own money, right?"

"Yeah."

They both placed a five yen coin next to the other offerings, then clapped their hands together and prayed.

Yumi prayed for the health of everyone she loved, and for Touko-chan. That she could reconcile with Touko-chan.

It was a lot to ask for a measly five yen.

"Oh right. I forgot to mention this before. If your wish comes true, you've got to bring an offering of fried tofu in thanks."

"Fried tofu ... "

"See, this is a shrine to the god Inari."

"It is too."

She looked closer and saw the foxes to the left and right, protecting the shrine.

"Hey, Yuuki. Can you draw me a map of how to get here for next time?"

"Huh? We just walked here and you still don't know?"

"But it was dark."

"It's less than ten minutes from home."

Yuuki muttered in astonishment. But he'd have to tell her the way. Yumi didn't know what would happen with Touko-chan, but the health of her loved ones seemed an easy wish to grant. She thought she'd definitely have to come back here with an offering of fried tofu in a year's time.

The earnest Fukuzawa siblings returned home at one minute to one, as instructed.

The house felt a bit warm when they stepped inside, considering the heating would have been turned off half an hour ago.

There was a note from their mother on the hallway floor. It had been left in a place they'd walk over so there was no way they could miss it. For instance, even if they hadn't turned the lights on, they'd still notice it when they stepped on it or kicked it.

"Welcome home. You must be cold. I've refilled the bath with hot water, so you can both take a turn."

"Ooh, thanks."

Yumi and Yuuki looked at each other, then they both took a deep breath and simultaneously called out, "Scissors, paper, rock."

Yumi went with rock, Yuuki with paper.

"You waited until I made my move and still lost."

Yuuki cackled, "You have much to learn, grasshopper," and headed towards the bath. As she watched him go, Yumi softly muttered:

"Which one of us has much to learn?"

Since he hadn't noticed that she lost on purpose.

Part 2

"Dad, dad, mom, Yuuki, dad, me, mom."

She was reading aloud as she moved her arm when Yuuki quietly said:

"... It seems like every year I tell you to sort them silently."

"But it just comes out, no matter what I do."

"I'm sure you wouldn't say it out loud if you thought it'd cause a bomb to go off in the house."

That's about what it would take. Exasperated, Yumi stopped for a bit then took a pocky stick from the cake dish and stuck it between her lips. Like it was a cigarette, although she'd never smoked. This way was much better than thinking about something dangerous like a bomb. If she opened her mouth the chocolate would fall out, so she had to be careful.

That morning, she'd been awoken by her mother calling out, "Wake up everyone," at 7am.

She got out of bed enthusiastically, even though she'd only had five hours sleep, and not just to avoid the curse of, "It'll be like that the whole year."

The New Year's cards were coming. Thinking this, she smartly declined her warm futon's invitation to go back to sleep.

Of course. The Fukuzawa family assembled and greeted one another, then ate the traditional New Year's zouni broth together. So the severe scolding she'd receive if she lazed around in bed was another reason to get up.

Now then, on to the New Year's cards.

The two children split the cards into four lots, with Yumi's and Yuuki's stacks looking a bit thicker than usual. Even though the number they'd sent hadn't really changed. What was going on?

"Who's this?"

Yumi mumbled. She couldn't recognize the sender's name, even though it was addressed to her. And it wasn't just one or two. Plus they were New

Year's cards, so all that was written in a lot of them was "Happy New Year" or "Best Wishes for the Year Ahead" or "New Year's Greetings," which made things hard because it didn't give any hints as to who the sender was or how they knew each other.

And yet they couldn't have been complete strangers, because they knew her home address. Lillian's was particularly strict about how they handled that sort of information.

"Huh? This looks like a boy's name ... ?"

She hadn't noticed immediately because the first couple of names had been gender neutral. But then she saw a couple that ended in X-rou or similar, which were more likely to be masculine names. On the subject of X-rou, she'd also spotted the manly name Arisugawa Kintarou, but that card got put in the "known" pile because it was her friend "Alice" from Hanadera Academy.

"Me too."

Yuuki muttered beside her, checking his New Year's cards.

"I got some from people I don't know too. Even from girls."

"Huh?"

Yumi reacted more to hearing about her brother getting cards from unknown women than from getting cards from unknown men. Was she a bro-con?

"Not Yoshino-san or Shimako-san?"

"No."

"... I guess not."

Amongst the cards Yumi had checked were ones from Yoshino-san and Shimako-san, and it was as though they'd coordinated their messages, because they'd written, "Give my regards to Yuuki-kun," and, "Give my regards to Yuuki-san," respectively. There would have been no need to include that in their notes if they'd sent one to him themselves.

"Who is it?"

There weren't really any privacy concerns since the recipient didn't know who the sender was. Yumi looked at the card in her brother's hand while Yuuki looked at his sister's "unknown" pile. And then:

"Ah!"

They both cried out almost simultaneously.

"From my class!"

Then they heard each other and said, "Huh?" Yumi tapped on the sender's name and said to Yuuki:

"This girl's my classmate."

"Same here."

As she listened to her brother, Yumi flipped over her pile of cards. Next, next. It turned out that girl hadn't even sent one to her classmate Yumi.

"How did it get here?"

"Well, they'd get our home address from the class network. And since we're siblings, they'd know we live together."

"Not that. How did I get a card from your classmate?"

Yumi asked, but it was thrown straight back at her.

"What do you think? Why did I get a card from your classmate?"

"... She must have seen you at the school festival."

And fallen for him. No, it didn't have to go that far, she may have just been interested in him.

"Don't you think it would be just the same for you?"

Neither of them knew how to react, but they both laughed and patted each other on the shoulder, saying, "You're popular." After this brotherly/sisterly show of conceit, Yumi reflected and thought that it was either conceit, or a display of sisterly idiocy. There had been some gossip about Yuuki amongst her classmates immediately after Lillian's school festival, so she thought that it might apply to him. But in her case, she thought it was a bit different.

"Anyway, let's write our replies."

"Yeah. I wonder if I've got enough cards left."

Returning to her room she took out the cards she'd set aside for this, but even that wasn't enough so she had to get some more from her mother and the last ones were just ordinary postcards that she wrote "Happy New Year" on.

There was no New Year's card from Touko-chan in her stack.

Since Touko-chan probably would have started writing her New Year's cards before the closing ceremony, she thought there was a chance one might arrive if it had been mailed before their harsh parting.

Because that's what Yumi had done.

Last year she'd almost forgotten and mailed them out in a panic, so this year she'd allowed plenty of time to write them. Although she'd done this alongside knitting Sachiko-sama's Christmas present, so she'd been really busy.

Oh, that's right. The card that Sachiko-sama had requested from her on the day of the closing ceremony was the only one that she'd sent out afterward. So Yumi was a bit worried about whether or not it would arrive on New Year's day. Since she was going to Sachiko-sama's house on the 2nd, it would be a bit funny if she arrived before her New Year's card. In that case, she would have been better off bringing it with her.

Sachiko-sama had sent her a card, just like she'd said. But Yumi didn't immediately recognize that it was from her. Because last year's New Year's card had made such an impression.

Indeed. Last year's had been a delicate India ink painting with deep black calligraphy, that was so delicate it was hard to imagine it was done by a high school student.

But, still.

"I wonder what happened."

A change in her mental state? This year's looked to be a colorful, computer generated, pop piece. On top of that.

"Mmm ... "

She thought that she'd seen a New Year's card very similar to this one at some point, but she couldn't remember.

It hadn't been exactly the same. But it had given off the same vibe. They'd been similar, but Sachiko-sama's had a better use of color and composition.

"I'm sure I've seen something like this before – "

But no matter how she tried, she couldn't retrieve it from its drawer in her memory.

There was nothing like it when she looked through the cards she'd received this year. Yuuki even let her look through his but that was a miss too. She thought about it some more and realized it hadn't been from this year. Much earlier. Right, probably from one year ago.

Casting her mind back, she realized with an, "Ah."

"My New Year's card from last year ... right."

Oh, geez, onee-sama. Muttering this, Yumi grinned on her own.

Stopping in Along the Way

Part 1

The second of January arrived.

Yumi left home with her shoulder bag stuffed with sleeping clothes, her toothbrush, and other such things on her right shoulder, and a paper bag containing a Maple Parlor tin of assorted cookies in her left hand.

In her usual clothes, jeans and a sweater with a duffel coat over the top. Her mother said she should take the opportunity to wear a kimono, but she was staying overnight. She wasn't qualified to wear anything that she couldn't put on by herself the following morning. Casual clothing was the highest priority.

9:30am.

She was heading out a bit early but there was a reason for that. She thought she'd stop in at a couple of places on the way to Sachiko-sama's house.

She took the bus to M Station where she transferred buses. Getting on the loop bus leaving from the south entrance that she usually took to school.

But she wasn't going to Lillian's Girls Academy today. She got off before there, at the bus stop in front of a Shinto shrine. It was the same route she'd taken with Satou Sei-sama on the second of January last year.

It wasn't like she'd become all sentimental about the graduated Sei-sama. And since Yumi didn't have her driver's license, obviously she hadn't parked her beloved car at the back of the shrine.

The reason for this?

A hatsumoude visit? Or to get a fortune?

No, no. She'd completed her hatsumoude visit at the shrine to Inari in her neighborhood, and she'd get discouraged if she drew "bad luck" as her fortune, so she passed on both.

"Let's do this."

After firing herself up, Yumi threw herself into the crowd of people in front of the food stalls. Calamari, okonomiyaki pancakes, octopus dumplings, grilled corn. She bought two servings of each and put them in a supermarket shopping bag she'd brought from home. In her mind, Yumi mocked herself for being an eco-friendly housewife.

She wanted to buy even more but unlike last year she didn't have a car to carry her straight to her destination. She'd reached the limit of what she could carry by herself. Additionally, it had been a bit more expensive than she'd expected, so it was a good place to stop. She'd spend all her New Year's money if she kept buying thoughtlessly.

Right. Her goal had been festival food. She could have bought some at her neighborhood shrine, but she thought it was better to get the same as Sei-sama had bought last year, so she'd made the trip out here. Basically, Yumi just wanted to see Sayako-oba-sama looking delighted.

She returned once more to M Station and this time she switched to a train. The carriage was surprisingly empty, so Yumi plopped down on a seat near the door, put half of her luggage on her lap and the other half in front of her shoes and let out a large sigh of relief.

Then she finally looked forwards and spotted someone she knew sitting opposite her.

"Noriko-chan?"

"Ah, Yumi-sama."

Noriko-chan must have boarded the train ahead of her, and she picked up her belongings and moved to the seat next to Yumi. A jumper skirt showed beneath her short beige down coat, with a cute pair of charcoal gray tights peeking out beneath that.

"Gokigenyou. Oh, and happy new year."

"Yeah. Happy new year."

It would be foolish to ask something like, "Where are you going?" or "How come you're on this train?" There were both attending the Ogasawara's

New Year's Party. They'd actually arranged to meet at the train station closest to Sachiko-sama's house but they'd run into each other a bit early.

"That's a lot of luggage you've got, Yumi-sama."

"Hahaha. The invitation send to bring your own, and I got a bit carried away."

Noriko-chan was traveling surprisingly lightly, perhaps because she was accustomed to taking small trips to view Buddhist statues. She had a bag one size smaller than Yumi's and a department store paper bag that looked like it contained pastries.

"I brought chocolates. They have something like marron glace inside. My gourmand great-aunt recommended them."

"Sounds good."

"They are!"

Noriko-chan agreed, full of confidence.

They didn't just sound tasty, they also sounded expensive. Whether consciously or not, they'd definitely raised the bar on the sort of gifts they were bringing to the Ogasawara family.

"I thought you and Shimako-san might have met up earlier, Noriko-chan."

"Ah, right. I went home for New Year's."

Yumi nodded, understanding. Noriko-chan's family lived a bit too far away for her to commute to Lillian's every day, so she stayed with her great-aunt.

The train moved onward accompanied by a gentle click-clack vibration. But she couldn't relax completely because she felt like she had to keep a tight grip on the handle of the plastic bag by her feet so that the calamari and grilled corn inside didn't come spilling out.

Click-clack. Whenever the train shook, the smell of scorched soy sauce came wafting out of the bag. Some distance away, an older lady in her Sunday best turned their way, saying, "I wonder what that smell is."

"Yumi-sama, um."

Click.

"Mm?"

Yumi was surprised by Noriko-chan's tone, which was completely different to her earlier, "They are!" so she looked to her side and saw Noriko-chan looking serious.

"Wh-what's the matter!?"

"I feel like I owe you a massive apology, Yumi-sama."

What? What?

Despite being a first-year, Noriko-chan was level headed. She rarely made a careless mistake. And yet Noriko-chan felt like she owed her an apology. A massive one at that.

"Did you do something to me?"

Since Yumi couldn't remember anything, all she could do was ask. They still had a bit of time left on the train. So this would be a detour on the way.

"Although I'm also sorry to be bringing this up again."

With that, Yumi immediately understood.

"Is this about Touko-chan?"

Noriko-chan nodded in agreement. There was only one thing that came to mind that she would be "sorry" for "bringing up again". The thing that Sachiko-sama had told her to "leave alone."

"But you didn't really have anything to do with what happened with Touko-chan – "

Noriko-chan shouldn't have felt responsible for Touko-chan's words and actions just because they were close friends. But Noriko-chan shook her head, indicating that she wasn't apologizing in Touko-chan's stead.

"I've always thought it would be good if Touko was your petit soeur – no, that's not right, I thought it would be good if you were Touko's onee-sama. But you never seemed to think much of her. Or rather, you were never conscious of her as a petit soeur. So I hated it when you innocently meddled in her affairs. ... I'm sorry."

"I see."

That would have been why Noriko-chan flared up unexpectedly when they asked her to invite Touko-chan and Kanako-chan to the Christmas party.

"But you were giving serious consideration to her. And yet, that Touko."

"Having the offer of soeurship turned down is neither a good thing nor a bad thing."

Although it had been quite a shock when she was rejected. But that was unavoidable. There was no blame, like a school that didn't admit students who failed their entrance exam, or a company that canceled a contract when their terms weren't met, or a lover who turned down a proposal. It was like that.

"But."

Noriko-chan mumbled.

"I don't think it's good to hide your own feelings."

There was an unshakeable self-belief there. As a result, Yumi felt a little bit braver.

"So you're saying that you don't think Touko-chan hates me?"

"Yes."

Of course. It was kind of reassuring.

"Then I must have made some kind of mistake."

Yumi said, as though to herself.

"A mistake?"

"Like with the timing, or the location, or her feelings, or how I asked her ... that sort of thing."

She looked out the window to see where they were, but the glass had clouded over so she could only faintly make out the scenery outside.

Part 2

They stood around chatting by the ticket gate of the train station that they'd arranged to meet at, and after about five minutes Shimako-san arrived.

"I'm sorry. Did I make you wait?"

"No, we got here a bit too early."

There was still more than ten minutes until their arranged meeting time of 11:30. But Shimako-san seemed to get a bit flustered when she saw them already standing together. She walked out of the ticket gate accompanied by the pitter-patter sound of zouri sandals.

That's right. Shimako-san was wearing a kimono. It wasn't an extravagant long-sleeved affair, but neither was it just a wool ensemble. It could be said to sit right in the middle of those two extremes. Although she was wearing some sort of coat over the top so they could only see the collar and from the waist down.

"Is that a komon kimono?"

"Yes. You're quite knowledgeable about kimonos."

"No, no, it was just a lucky guess."

In truth, Yumi had stopped adding to her knowledge of kimonos one year ago, but she'd opened that rarely used drawer and it seemed like the same sort of kimono that Sachiko-sama had worn during New Year's last year, so she thought she'd ask. The kimono had a small floral pattern across it. As for the color, she could see gray and pink and green. But just by wearing the kimono, Shimako-san was saying that she'd be able to put it on by herself. Impressive.

"So, then, do you have a yukata to sleep in, by any chance?"

Yumi asked, pointing at her tote bag, but Shimako-san laughed.

"Sadly, no, just pajamas."

At that point, Yumi caught a glimpse of Noriko-chan smiling warmly and watching over their conversation out of the corner of her eye.

"Ah, sorry. I jumped straight into conversation without the greeting."

"Not at all, I didn't mean to rush you."

So with that, the three offered their greetings together.

"Happy New Year."

Let's look after each other this year too. After bowing their heads and exchanging greetings, Yumi noticed an unsteady atmosphere between the White Rose soeurs.

"Is this, perhaps, the first time you've met this year ... ?"

"Yes. What about it?"

That's right. Noriko-chan said she'd been spending New Year's with her family and had come straight here.

"Sorry, I didn't realize. I'll leave you alone for a bit, so take your time – "

She quickly picked up her bags and turned around but then Shimako-san grabbed her upper arm and said, "Oh Yumi-san, there's no need for that."

"What, even after all this time, are you looking out for us?"

"But, well."

It was the first time the soeurs had met this year, wasn't she just a third-wheel?

"If you're going to do that, wouldn't we also have to hide somewhere when we arrived at Sachiko-sama's house?"

In theory, that would be right. But those two hadn't been soeurs all that long ... not all that long ... then Yumi counted it out on her fingers and corrected herself. It had been six months already. They couldn't be called veterans, but their relationship was probably in its prime. Because of that, she decided to stop fussing over them too much.

"What were Rei-sama and Yoshino-san doing?"

Shimako-san asked, looking around restlessly.

"I asked them just in case, but they said they'd go straight there."

Coming from their house, they'd have to take a detour to get to this train station.

"It's just the three of us then?"

"That's right."

Since they'd all arrived, they decided to leave the train station even though it was a bit earlier than planned.

It was about a fifteen to twenty minute walk from the train station to Sachiko-sama's house. About three bus stops. They could take a bus from outside the train station, but the bus stop was a fair way from Sachiko-sama's house, so they'd still have to walk some distance.

"What should we do?"

"You've visited her a couple of times before, right Yumi-san? Which way did you go then?"

"Every time I've been to her house, someone's driven me there."

"Huh, so it's like your first time going to her house too?"

A palpable sense of "Are we going to be okay?" was radiating from Noriko-chan. But Yumi had been instructed by her onee-sama to safely escort the first-timers, so there was no way she could say something like, "I'm not sure."

"Hey. Well, she did fax me a map. Huh, which way is which?"

Yumi unfolded the map and was rotating it around when Noriko-chan said, "Pardon me," and relieved her of it.

"The station's here and north is up, so it should go this way around. So with that, this street's that one over there, so I guess we should go straight ahead for now. As long as we're heading in the right direction, we can revise our route at any cross streets on the way."

There was a reason behind Noriko-chan's unsure words. The map she'd been sent was rather vague ... and after walking for a while they were still in a residential area, with no sight of the shopping district or large building landmarks that were on the map.

Well, even so, Sachiko-sama's house wasn't just a building, but a plot of land large enough to be a public park, so they'd know when they were

alongside it. The other people living in their neighborhood probably used the Ogasawara estate as a landmark.

"Ah. There's a hill over there. We must be on the right track after all."

Hanging from the hand of their advance guard Noriko-chan was the bag of festival food Yumi bought. Noriko-chan was in unusually high spirits and took the lead, either because she was the only first-year, or because the two second-years weren't being all that energetic.

"Quite a reliable petit soeur you've got."

"Yes, she is, isn't she?"

Like pensioners watching over some young people, they chatted as they slowly walked. Ahead of them, Noriko-chan would sometimes go down a wrong path before doubling back, so their slow pace worked out quite nicely.

The street they were walking along was like an esplanade, with trees growing along the side. All the gardens were overflowing with evergreen trees too, so it was quite pretty.

"Will your family be alright today?"

Yumi asked Shimako-san. She seemed to remember hearing from Shimako-san's onee-sama, Satou Sei-sama, that Shimako-san helped out her family at New Year's and other such times. Although now she knew that this was because Shimako-san's family ran a temple.

"Yes. People are coming to help from outside, so my dad urged me to go, saying they'd be fine without me."

"Your father's really down-to-earth."

In truth, Yumi had only seen Shimako-san's father twice. The first time he was running on the school's track wearing a monk's stole. The second time he looked like he'd stepped out of a yakuza film and was buying oden soup and frankfurters. He was a cheerful and mischievous Buddhist monk and Yumi probably wouldn't have realized he was Shimako-san's father if she hadn't been told.

"My dad seemed to be relieved that I was spending time with my friends, like a normal young girl. On top of that, my older brother's back

home now, which is quite unusual. Whenever I'm around they try their hardest not to argue, so I guess this is good timing?"

"Your brother's home?"

Yumi had only found out that Shimako-san had an older brother about a week ago. Since she'd thought Shimako-san was an only child, she didn't really get what she meant by "back home." And the "quite unusual" remark made him seem like some kind of wanderer, like Tora-san from the *Otoko wa Tsurai yo* film series.

"So I've brought some manjuu buns my brother made."

Shimako-san held up the parcel wrapped in furoshiki cloth that she was holding in one hand, her other holding her tote bag. Indeed, Yumi had been wondering what was in there for some time now.

"Manjuu buns? Your brother made them?"

"Yes. I thought he specialized in western sweets, but he seems to be trying his hand at traditional Japanese sweets too."

Since this was the first Yumi had heard of him specializing in western sweets, her shock hadn't been at him making Japanese confectionery. She'd thought he must have been a Buddhist priest, since she'd heard there was some disagreement about whether or not he would inherit the temple. But he was actually a patissier. No, perhaps a former patissier now turned Japanese confectionery maker. Shimako-san's home life had always been something of an enigma, but it just kept getting more and more mysterious.

"Ah, I've found Itou-san. Suzuki-san should be next."

Noriko-chan happily reported from her position ahead of them, having checked out the house nameplates.

Sachiko-sama had been looking out for them, and wrote the surnames of the people that owned the houses on the street corners on her map. Still, neither of those names were all that unusual, so they couldn't rule out the possibility of there being several houses with those names in the area.

They arrived at Suzuki-san's house before long and turned onto a street that Yumi vaguely remembered.

"It's probably just along here."

Yumi called out, pointing up ahead.

Soon enough, the tall and long wall appeared. There was no mistaking it.

The gate to the Ogasawara house was along that straight line.

She broke into a jog, overtaking Noriko-chan.

Behind her, Noriko-chan remarked to Shimako-san that she was like a lost dog that wandered around and then suddenly sped up and started running when it was near home.

Part 3

"Whoa ... "

Noriko-chan said as she looked up at the tall, sturdy gates.

"You're sure this isn't a park?"

Everyone probably had the same reaction when they first visited the Ogasawara family, because their estate was conspicuous even for the exclusive residential area it was in.

"It's not to scale on this map."

She tapped the piece of paper. Indeed, their destination was marked by a small rectangle, labeled as "Ogasawara" with an arrow pointing to it. It probably would have looked messy if she'd outlined their entire estate, so she'd only marked out the position of the entrance. Yumi had quickly cottoned on to this, since she'd been there before, but Noriko-chan didn't seem to realize until she got there. She'd been saying things like, "It's strange that she didn't put her neighbors on the map," and, "It looks like she's surrounded on both sides by a parking lot, or a municipal garden."

In contrast to that.

"This is your first time here too, right, Shimako-san? You seem to be taking it in quite calmly."

"Not at all. I'm too surprised to speak."

"But your house is pretty big, isn't it onee-sama?"

From what Noriko-chan was saying, it seemed as though Shimako-san's house was just one part of the rather large temple grounds.

"But that's the temple. Our family's private space is rather modest."

So rather than being their private property, it was the parishioners', a place for locals to gather, that sort of thing. It wasn't a tourist attraction, but the building was quite old so a lot of work went into preserving it, and there were always people coming and going, so from time to time it felt like living in a borrowed place. It seemed like it was quite tough.

Looking at her watch, it was three minutes to twelve. Since they took their time because they were a bit lost, Yumi calculated that the 20 minute one-way trip had taken closer to 30 minutes.

She'd heard that when visiting someone's house you should arrive five minutes late, but she wasn't sure if that referred to when you arrived on their property or when you took off your shoes and entered into their house. It wouldn't make much difference for a normal house, but the gap was a couple of minutes at the Ogasawara house.

They were a bit early, but it'd be strange to hang around on the sidewalk too, so Yumi pressed the intercom buzzer.

"Yes?"

Was it Sachiko-sama or Sayako-oba-sama? A refined lady's voice answered.

"This is Fukuzawa Yumi. I have Shimako-san and Noriko-chan with me."

"Welcome. I'll open the gates so come inside. Rei and Yoshino-chan are already here."

The correct answer was Sachiko-sama. Sayako-oba-sama probably wouldn't refer to Rei-sama as "Rei," without an honorific.

The door opened automatically and the trio stepped onto the Ogasawara estate, still feeling a bit overwhelmed.

Inside was a forest.

No, that was obviously a metaphor. A single road traced a gentle curve through the tall trees. Like it was hiding what was at the end of it from outside. Exiting the forest, they saw the front of a large house.

"I'm not even surprised any more."

Noriko-chan said. Indeed. Sachiko-sama's house was so far removed from a normal house that it would be exhausting to react to each and every thing. After a certain amount of surprise, it was better to just accept it as "that's how it is."

In the car-park on the right, two bicycles were parked in an empty spot.

"I wonder if those are Yoshino-san and Rei-sama's."

They both looked to be shiny and new.

Maybe they'd both bought replacements for the new year. How extravagant.

They set that idle speculation aside and made their way to the building's front entrance.

According to protocol, the next step was to ring the doorbell. Since she'd visited a couple of times before, Yumi thought she should take the initiative and perform that role.

"Umm."

That's right. She pulled on the chain in front of her.

(... It's heavy.)

After feeling a bit of resistance, she heard the sound of a small bell ringing, announcing the presence of Yumi and friends to those inside.

"Welcome."

It was Sachiko-sama that came to greet them.

"Happy New Year."

The trio offered their greeting. It wasn't like they'd rehearsed it, but their voices were in perfect unison.

"Happy New Year."

Sachiko-sama was wearing a light-blue komon kimono with a stepping stone pattern. Her maroon haori jacket was the same as last year. Her long hair was loosely braided and held up with an ornate hairpin.

"Now, come inside."

Sachiko-sama gestured at the row of slippers and Yumi's group took off their jackets and said, "Pardon our intrusion," then removed their shoes.

Yumi had a quick glance and saw that Yoshino-san's and Rei-sama's shoes were lined up next to theirs. From her position, she couldn't see any men's shoes. It looked like it really was women-only. Even though they were related, it seemed as though Kashiwagi-san had been excluded after all.

"Here, Yumi-sama."

Before they started walking down the hallway, Noriko-chan offered her the shopping bag filled with souvenirs from the shrine food stalls.

"Ah, thanks."

Such a scrupulous junior, in every possible way. The future looked bright ... although, she was already reliable.

Walking ahead of them, Sachiko-sama spoke softly, so that only Yumi could hear, saying, "Your New Year's card arrived on New Year's day."

It was such a minor thing but Yumi was overjoyed to hear that it had arrived on time.

Why was it so? She felt comfortably pleased, like she'd been secretly passed some sweet cotton candy.

They were led to a traditional Japanese style room, the location of their New Year's party.

There were glasses, drinks and food spread out across the two low tables, so it was already quite party-like.

"Ah, Happy New Year."

Rei-sama said, noticing the three newcomers.

"Happy New Year."

Her outfit was a blue sweater over a white shirt with plain jeans, which was closest to Yumi's casual look.

"Happy New Year. Oh, Shimako-san's wearing a kimono."

Yoshino-san said, having rushed over when she heard the exchange of greetings. She was wearing a gray and cream checked pantsuit, which was an unusually boyish style.

"Sayako-oba-sama~. Yumi-san's group has arrived."



Yoshino-san called to outside the room, in a hurry to get the greetings done.

"Sayako-oba-sama asked me to tell her when you arrived."

Yoshino-san was comfortable enough to call her "Sayako-oba-sama," even though it was their first meeting. Well, Sachiko-sama's mother was very easy to get along with.

"Did you ride here, Yoshino-san?"

"Yeah."

"Both your bikes are shiny and new."

Yoshino-san puffed her chest out with pride, saying, "It's great isn't it?" Across from her, Sachiko-sama asked Rei-sama:

"Oh, you got a new one too, Rei? What happened to the bike you had last time?"

"It broke."

Rei-sama answered ruefully.

"My uncle bought me a new one at the end of year sales."

"It broke? Haven't you had many years of riding and fixing bicycles?"

"The damage was bad enough to write it off, so it was decommissioned ... that sort of thing."

Rei-sama glanced at Yoshino-san. But Yoshino-san was looking firmly into the future. It looked as though she was heavily involved in whatever events led to Rei-sama's beloved bicycle being decommissioned. Especially since the uncle that Rei-sama mentioned was Yoshino-san's father.

As for Sayako-oba-sama, who had been called earlier.

"Welcome."

She appeared carrying a tree branch of some sort, with lots of red berries in the green leaves. She was wearing a black kimono, so the scattering of red made it look like a pattern drawn onto the sleeves.

"Happy New Year."

"Happy New Year, Yumi-chan. And, you two are – "

Sayako-oba-sama turned her gaze to the White Rose soeurs.

"I'm Toudou Shimako."

"I'm her petit soeur, Nijou Noriko."

"Pleased to meet you, Shimako-chan and Noriko-chan. You can call me Sayako. The household staff are having a break today so we can't offer you much hospitality but let's have fun together."

"Okay."

It went without saying that the White Rose soeurs were immediately struck by Sayako-oba-sama's charm.

"Mother, you're dripping water."

Sachiko-sama pointed at the branch Sayako-oba-sama was carrying, where water was trickling to the stem and then dripping down.

"Ah, oh no. I was right in the middle of a flower arrangement. I asked Rei-san to pick some coralberry from her garden and bring it along."

The beautiful lady said, "This is a disaster, such a disaster," as she unhurriedly returned to the hallway, while the younger visitors watched on enraptured.

Except for one, her daughter Sachiko-sama.

"She's the same as ever, isn't she?"

She sighed, then took a tissue from her kimono and wiped away the drops of water on the tatami mat.

Then, like a detective, or police dog, inspecting the scene of the crime, she followed after Sayako-oba-sama, carefully wiping up each of the drops that had fallen to the floor.

Full to Bursting at the New Year's Party

Part 1

Yoshino-san had brought a combination of fried chicken and french fries and Rei-sama had brought a large take-away pizza and two 2 litre drink bottles (oolong tea and orange juice). Ah, plus a coralberry branch. It was currently adorning the alcove, in an arrangement with apricot and gold stained willow.

"Yumi-chan, you remembered. I'm touched!"

Sayako-oba-sama danced with joy when she spotted the festival food and, overcome with emotion, embraced Yumi. An innocent maiden, no matter her age (and her actual age was unknown to Yumi). She always came across as cute, although it was a bit impolite to think that.

"Let's heat them up right away. Ah, I wonder if Rei-san's pizza should go first?"

"Ah, I'll do it."

They followed Sayako-oba-sama into the kitchen, Rei-sama carrying her pizza and Yumi with her festival food.

"Oba-sama, you've got two ovens, right? If it's alright to use them both at once, we could split it into two lots."

Rei-sama inquired.

"If it's alright to use them both at once?"

Sayako-oba-sama looked confused.

"I mean, if it's not going to trip a breaker, or something like that."

"A breaker ... I've never thought about that. I use them whenever I like, though."

But that didn't rule out the possibility that other people had noticed and refrained from using them both at once. Sayako-oba-sama pondered this,

saying, "What should we do?" and was answered by Sachiko-sama who appeared in the kitchen behind her.

"It'll be fine. When you made those massive quantities of mille-feuille, it took over all of the big oven, but we still had a proper dinner that night, right? That would have been made with the small oven."

Indeed, that was quite the compelling piece of evidence.

"I suppose so."

Sayako-oba-sama seemed to temporarily accept this, but another question soon popped out of her mouth.

"Oh, but then why did we only use one oven last year?"

"Well, that's because,"

This time it was Yumi's turn to answer.

"Last year, no-one knew how to work the big oven."

"Ah, that's right."

But since then, she'd used it to bake mille-feuille, which meant –

"You've mastered how to use this oven then, oba-sama? That's good, I think it'd be great for the large pizza."

Rei-sama quickly opened the oven door and placed the pizza inside. Yumi placed the octopus dumplings inside the small oven too. They called it the small oven but that name was just for convenience, as it was a standard family-size oven. Probably about the same size as the one the Fukuzawa's had at home. But the other one was large enough for commercial use. It was big enough that they could probably roast two whole turkeys in there at once.

"You should cover them with foil, it'd be bad if the dumplings burst open."

"Okay."

She followed Rei-sama's instructions then switched the oven on. As she was moving the calamari and corn into the heatproof dish that Sachiko-sama held out to her, Yumi accidentally glanced to her side and saw Sayako-oba-sama frozen in front of the large oven she'd been entrusted to operate.

"Oba-sama ... umm, is something the matter?"

"What should I do, Rei-san? I've only ever used it as an oven."

"_"

Although reheating a pizza wasn't totally unrelated to using the oven functionality. But Rei-sama didn't know how powerful the oven was, so she let Sayako-oba-sama take care of that. She watched it through the glass door and when the time was right she opened the door and placed a single piece of aluminum foil over the top of the pizza. Thanks to that, they avoided burning it and ended up with piping hot pizza.

Yumi got caught up watching this and some of the dumplings exploded, but thanks to the foil she managed to avoid a huge disaster. Cleaning exploded foods from a microwave oven was enough to make her want to cry, so this was quite a relief.

"Alright, let's eat these while they're hot. Ah, before that."

First, she filled their glasses with non-alcoholic champagne.

"Does everyone have a glass? Well then, a toast!"

"Let's make this another good year."

They clinked glasses with the person next to them and took a sip. Uwah ... the champagne fizz jumped across to the tip of her nose. Mmm, it was good.

From the second glass onwards it was self-serve and they were free to choose their favorite drink. As well as the juice and oolong tea that Rei-sama had brought, there was also herbal tea and roasted green tea.

So with that, the food that they'd brought was laid out along the tables and the New Year's party began.

There was Sayako-oba-sama's homemade potato salad. Bite-sized portions were placed on top of slightly bitter leaves (chicory apparently), which served as plates and made it easy to pick up. Yumi had often had potato salad at home, but this was somehow different and felt more fancy, like adult's food. As an example, she'd describe it as a "delicacy," instead of "tasty."

Sachiko-sama had made ham and cheese sandwiches, and they were exquisite. They were cut into single mouthfuls, so obviously not meant to be eaten with a knife and fork, but skewered with toothpicks instead.

"It's really good, but don't you think it'd make the flavor pop just a bit more if it had pickles or olives?"

Rei-sama's advice was probably correct but since Sachiko-sama didn't like either of those things it seemed unlikely that she would follow it. It looked like Rei-sama knew this and had intentionally said it anyway.

The take-away pizza and fried chicken were the standard fare, but still (no, because of this) quite tasty.

The various sweets were set aside for after-meal enjoyment. At any rate, they were all staying overnight, so there was plenty of time left for chatting and eating.

The intercom sounded and Sayako-oba-sama hurriedly left the room.

"It's so busy without the house staff around."

"Could it be, perhaps, another guest?"

Yoshino-san asked Sachiko-sama. Asking if she'd invited anyone else.

"Yes, well ... perhaps."

Sachiko-sama responded vaguely and stood up. Yumi's mind buzzed with thoughts of "what if?"

She thought there was a chance it was Touko-chan. Since she knew that Sachiko-sama had invited her to the New Year's party.

But would she really come? Yumi didn't know.

She didn't even know if she should follow after Sachiko-sama or wait there motionless, despite her impatience.

They'd used the intercom so they were now at the front gate. How long would it take for the gate to open and for them to walk to the front of the house? Five minutes? A bit longer?

Even if she stayed still, there should be some way to determine whether or not it was Touko-chan during that short time. The bell would ring first, which would demand Yumi's attention.

But it ended a lot quicker than she expected. The bell wasn't rung.

Sayako-oba-sama and Sachiko-sama arrived back in the room carrying three and four lacquer coated wooden boxes, respectively.

"It was the sushi store."

To reveal the trick: since the sushi was delivered by car, it was many times quicker for them to drive from the gate to the house than it was to walk, and since they'd announced their arrival over the intercom, Sayako-oba-sama was waiting outside for them to arrive.

Yumi felt conflicted, she was both relieved and disappointed.

Looking at her watch, it was 1:30.

Touko-chan probably should have arrived by now, if she was feeling inclined to do so.

Part 2

With their stomachs already quite full, they all looked in anguish at the containers of sushi placed in front of them.

"I want to eat it, but I don't know if I can."

"It's torture ... "

Just like last year, Yumi faltered when she saw the array of high quality nigirizushi delivered to them by the official sushi suppliers to the Ogasawara household.

"Oh my. You can just set it aside and eat it when you're hungry. We've got plenty of time, so feel free to peck at it as you like."

Sayako-oba-sama said.

"But, it's nigirizushi."

Even though they were in a hard-to-warm traditional Japanese room, the party had been going on for an hour and a half and it had already warmed up significantly. Leaving the raw sushi there and pecking at it seemed ill-advised.

"Alright. Then how about we play cards, and whenever you lose you have to eat a piece?"

Sayako-oba-sama said, smiling innocently, since it was already torture. But since that would only result in one piece disappearing every game, it didn't seem like it would be all that efficient.

"No. Why don't we just try and eat the sushi for now? If you can't eat it all, we'll put what's left over in the refrigerator. We can leave the games until after."

Sachiko-sama's proposal was the correct one. No matter how large the Ogasawara family's refrigerator was, they probably couldn't put nine people's untouched sushi boxes in there.

Even so, it was funny how their chopsticks kept moving after saying, "Itadakimasu." It was probably because the sushi was made of such good

ingredients. Their color and gloss was enough to stimulate the appetite just by looking at them.

"Onee-sama. Um, would you like to swap your sea urchin roe, salmon roe and abalone for something of mine?"

Naturally, she wasn't about to pull the same stunt as Kashiwagi-san and reach over into Sachiko-sama's sushi box directly, so she tried asking.

"Huh?"

Sachiko-sama seemed confused, but then she smiled and said, "Ah."

"Is that because of what Suguru-san did?"

"Yeah ... I suppose."

Yumi admitted truthfully, since there was no point lying about it. But she wasn't thinking about competing with Kashiwagi-san, she simply wanted to remove the foods Sachiko-sama hated from her sight.

"You really shouldn't pay so much attention to Suguru-san. It's not like there's foods I will and won't eat. Moreover, it would be somewhat pathetic of me to be coddled by you."

"But."

Your eyes glazed over when you looked at them, onee-sama.

"I was thinking I should broaden my diet, just a little. Even if I don't like them, I'm not about to say that I can't eat them."

"Hah."

Yumi thought she was offering a lifeboat but instead it looked like she'd backed her onee-sama into a corner. By making this declaration, she'd cut off her avenue of retreat.

Their friends were listening attentively to their conversation, although they weren't joining in. The movement of chopsticks had suddenly slowed and the soft twitter of conversation had disappeared.

With her chopsticks still on her sea urchin roe sushi, Yumi pondered what she should do next.

"Do you like those?"

Sachiko-sama asked her.

"Huh? Yeah."

Since she'd been fine with taking Sachiko-sama's if she hadn't wanted it, obviously she didn't hate it. Although there wasn't really any types of sushi that Yumi hated.

"If you feel like doing something, how about you enjoy it in front of me?"

"Huh?"

That was a rather strange request.

"All you want me to do is eat it?"

"Right. That's all. Give it a go."

"Well then."

She opened her mouth wide, saying, "Ahhh," and took a mouthful of sea urchin roe sushi. She was going to act like a mother trying to get her child to eat by saying, "Tasty," but once she started eating she couldn't talk.

(Ah ...)

The taste of juicy sea urchin roe spread out in her mouth. The rice, nori seaweed, and accompanying soy sauce were all undoubtedly made from fine ingredients too. She instinctively closed her eyes and enjoyed the exquisite harmony. Once again she'd been able to experience the taste of the Palace of the Dragon King.

"Yumi-chan."

Hearing Rei-sama whispering to her, Yumi opened her eyes as she chewed.

"Ah."

Sachiko-sama was adding soy sauce to her sea urchin roe. With the air of someone taking up a challenge.

"Watch your mouth, Yumi."

Just after she said this, Sachiko-sama ate her gunkanmaki sushi piece. As for Yumi, even as she was thinking about what brought that warning on she realized that this was a pivotal moment for Sachiko-sama, so she chewed silently without responding.

Sachiko-sama's gaze held firm. Staring straight at Yumi's face as she chewed.

Then, finally, she swallowed it down. Her eyes darted around lightly.

"There's nothing I can't eat."

But she was clearly overdoing it. Because Sachiko-sama's eyes were tearing up.

"It's just a matter of getting accustomed to it."

Sachiko-sama, who hated to lose, said with finality.

"Incredible. Oh Sachiko-san, having Yumi-chan's expression as a side-dish with your hated sea urchin roll!"

The silence was shattered by Sayako-oba-sama's exclamation.

"Yumi-san looked like she was enjoying eating it."

"That reminds me, isn't there a folklore about eating lots of rice accompanied by the smell of grilled eel."

Everyone laughed along and added their own comments.

"That's enough from the peanut gallery. Yumi, next up is abalone."

"Ah, okay!"

So, in this way, Sachiko-sama ate all the food she loathed, even though she was overdoing it a bit.

Then, with her work done, Sachiko-sama quietly placed her egg roll in Yumi's container. It looked as though she'd remembered Yuuki doing this last year.

Even though Sachiko-sama had said she shouldn't pay so much attention to Suguru-san. Yumi smiled to herself.

Part 3

The games began just after 3pm.

First up was the refined, traditional New Year's game of 100 Poems. As she waited, Yumi flexed her wrists.

"Living all alone – "

Sayako-oba-sama read the first part of the poem.

(Living all alone ... I think the bottom part is, "Can you realize at all," so –)

Actually, after her ignominious defeat last year, she'd spent a little bit of time studying the 100 poems at home. But this was just a thin veneer.

However.

"Here!"

Shimako-san picked it up from nearby. Since it was on Shimako-san's side, by the time Yumi had found it it was already too late. Sachiko-sama had also been reaching out for it, but she was further away so it looked like she got off to a slow start.

"The Mother of Michitsuna. That's right, Shimako-chan."

Sayako-oba-sama confirmed that it was correct and read the top and bottom sections.

*Living all alone,
Through the hours of the night,
Til the daylight comes:
Can you realize at all
The emptiness of that night?*

From memory, this poem was about a woman whose husband had gone to see a mistress and, "how long the night seems when you're not there."

Hearing Sayako-oba-sama read that poem aloud made it all the more poignant. Her husband, Tooru-oji-sama, was out today. The annual tradition was that the men would visit their mistresses.

Even though he had a wonderful wife like Sayako-oba-sama. From what she knew of Tooru-oji-sama, he seemed kind and a devoted husband – These were the thoughts that Yumi idly pondered.

"Here."

Yumi was brought back to her senses when a card was plucked from right in front of her.

"Uwah."

The card with, "That rose on Mount Mikasa," that should have been by her right knee was gone.

"It's because you were spacing out."

She'd been found out. Sachiko-sama chuckled to herself, holding the correct card in her hand.

She wouldn't win like this. Yumi decided to roll up her sleeves and play for real.

However.

"Eight-fold cherry flowers – "

"Here."

"An autumn eve – "

"Here."

Sachiko-sama and Shimako-san scooped them up one after the other while she looked on in shock.

Rei-sama had a large reach and moved quickly, so when she found a card she could get it with lightning speed. Noriko-chan kept plugging away steadily. Yoshino-san seemed to have given up already and was only looking at the five cards around her.

Her hasty study was never going to be enough to catch up to them.

Even if she strained to remember that the second half of "Eight-fold cherry flowers," was "In our nine-fold palace court," by the time she'd done

this someone was already reaching out for the card. If she didn't want to be hopeless, it looked like she'd have to practice until her body moved without waiting to analyze the words she heard.

In the end, the game devolved into the four others sharing the scraps that Sachiko-sama and Shimako-san didn't pick up.

When it was over, she was a bit disappointed but Sachiko-sama gently patted her on the shoulder.

"But you did better than last year, right?"

Thanks to her efforts, she'd improved slightly over the previous year. It made her happy that Sachiko-sama had recognized this, so she perked up.

Sachiko-sama said, "Let's see," and spread Yumi's cards out. What did she get?

"Just as past time filled with grief comes quietly back in thought ... And crushed upon the shore, remembering what has been ... but now it is my heart's desire, it may long, long years endure ... quite a lot of poems about brooding people. That's troublesome."

That's troublesome, she said.

"A 100 Poems tarot card reading?"

It's not like the cards they picked up showed what was going on in their heart.

"I wonder."

But even if she said that, wouldn't it mean that Sachiko-sama and Shimako-san, who had lots of cards, had all their emotions mixed up inside their head in a massive cacaphony?

"You wonder, onee-sama."

Yumi gazed at the ten or so cards she'd been given back. There really did seem to be a lot of brooding people.

*If I should live long
Then perhaps the present days
May be dear to me,
Just as past time filled with grief
Comes quietly back in thought.*

(If I live a long life, will I look back and reminisce on the present?
And yearn for these days, even though they seem tough?)

*Like a driven wave,
Dashed by fierce winds on a rock,
So am I: alone
And crushed upon the shore,
Remembering what has been.*

(Like a wave that smashes itself against a rock,
I spend these days fretting about that person.)

*For your precious sake,
Once my eager life itself
Was not dear to me.
But now it is my heart's desire
It may long, long years endure.*

(Even though I thought I'd risk my life if it meant meeting you,
now I wish that today would stretch on forever.)

Indeed, there was plenty to think about. Yumi stopped interpreting the rest of her cards.

Part 4

During the card games, Sayako-oba-sama left her seat for a little while. Yumi thought that perhaps she was a bit tired, but she returned before too long and said to everyone:

"Now then, next up is human sugoroku."

"Human sugoroku?"

"Right. Let's have teams of two. Why don't we go with the Rose colors?"

Everyone agreed, even though they didn't understand. Even her daughter, Sachiko-sama, looked confused.

"You'll move yourselves instead of the game pieces."

Sayako-oba-sama spread the imitation vellum she was holding out in front of everyone. Drawn on it was a sugoroku board, like was traditionally found in the New Year's edition of children's magazines. The board contained a path that wound around from "Start" to "End." However, the squares didn't contain instructions like "Miss a turn" or "When you roll 2, move forward 2 squares." Instead, they had cryptic names like "Hippopotamus Space" and "Jellyfish Space."

"These are ... "

"They're all room names. When you land on one, go to that room and follow the directions. The names are all written on the door."

"Uhh."

"But don't go into any rooms with a "No Entry" sign."

In other words, she was using the entire house for sugoroku. That seemed to be what she was saying. The rooms they were forbidden to enter were private spaces, like Sachiko-sama's grandfather's room, or the live-in-staff's quarters.

"There's a prize for the winning team~."

There was a general reaction of, "Oooh." It had been like this at the Christmas party, but everyone was even more fired up by the thought of winning the prize.

"This could be good."

Yoshino-san muttered, gripping Rei-sama's hand tightly. The Yellow Rose soeurs hadn't done that well at 100 Poems or the other card games. It looked like they were planning a comeback with sugoroku.

Noriko-chan stayed silent, but her eyes sparkled.

"But the "Hippopotamus Space" ... You didn't have to give them names like that."

Sachiko-sama muttered peevishly.

"But if I labeled them as "Second Floor Traditional Japanese Room" or "Basement Storage" you'd have a definite advantage because you live here, Sachiko-san. That's why."

Sayako-oba-sama responded to Sachiko-sama.

" ... I understand."

She agreed without enthusiasm. Although in truth, it seemed as though Sachiko-sama had made her objection on the grounds that they could have been named things like "Chinese Bellflower Space" or "Maple Space." But then she'd decided there was no point in continuing that conversation, since her mother didn't seem to doubt her own naming sense in the slightest.

Still, at the very least it meant that all the spaces on the board were rooms. The Ogasawara Residence was incredible, as expected.

"Alright, let's start with the first team's youngest member rolling the die."

The Yellow Rose team started first, since they looked the most eager. They rolled a three and advanced to the "Water Flea Space."

"It goes without saying, but the square number has no relation to its proximity to this room."

Sayako-oba-sama said. Okay, so just because it was square three didn't mean it was three rooms away.

The next team rolled the die, without waiting for the departed team to return. There was no "Miss a Turn," but the teams couldn't rejoin the game until they'd cleared the task in their room. Which meant that even after they

found the room, if they took too long then there was the possibility that by the time they returned some other team had made their way to the end.

With that, the second-running White Rose team rolled a five and landed on the "Hippopotamus Space." Yumi rolled a one, and they headed for the "Komodo Dragon Space." It says "headed for," but none of the teams actually knew where to go so all they could do was wander around the house.

"It doesn't seem wise to wander around at random. Let's do a circle starting from here. This way we can memorize the location of the other rooms too."

"Okay~."

Yumi responded cheerfully to her onee-sama. But the "Komodo Dragon Space" wasn't that easy to find. On their way they spotted the "Water Flea Space" but it seemed like the Yellow Rose team hadn't found it yet. Behind them, they could hear Yoshino-san's cry of, "It's not here~."

The White Rose team soon found the "Hippopotamus Space" but when they came out they didn't head back to the room where Sayako-oba-sama was waiting, instead they set out in search of something. Hmm, that must have something to do with the instructions in the "Hippopotamus Space."

During all this hustle and bustle they found the "Komodo Dragon Space." It was a stall in the second-floor restroom. A bathroom stall was indeed a room, but –

"What's this?"

Sachiko-sama screeched. Atop the closed lid of the western-style toilet was a pencil and a number of pages from a paperback book. Printed on the pages were crossword puzzles. Thus, the instructions:

"Solve a puzzle and bring it back."

The crosswords were in a 7x7 grid, so they wouldn't take that long to solve. Sachiko-sama briefly flicked through the pages and picked the one that she judged easiest.

"Since there's only one pencil, it looks like we're supposed to solve it here."

Using the tank as a desk, the pencil moved fluidly. Yumi was wondering if there was some way she could help, but since she was no match for her onee-sama in terms of knowledge she remained silent so as not to interrupt her onee-sama's thoughts.

"Yumi."

Suddenly, the sound of the pencil stopped.

"Y-yes."

"A recently popular four man comedy group, six characters, the first character's 'shi' and the second last character's 'mo' ... do you know it?"

Yumi was a bit excited, now that her time to shine had (maybe) arrived.

"Um ... Shi-something-something-something-mo-something."

She mumbled, counting along on her fingers.

"Ah, it's "Shi-ma-n-mo-zu.""

It was a strange group, made up of two sort of cool twenty-somethings, another guy that was around the same age but looked scary, and an older guy in his forties. She'd seen them in commercials fairly often of late. Oh, so Sachiko-sama hadn't known that.

"Thanks, we're done."

Sachiko-sama put the pencil down.

"Let's hurry back."

The pair rushed down the stairs and into the traditional Japanese room.

"Oh my, that was quick. We're going in order so you'll have to wait a little while."

Sayako-oba-sama knocked back her daughter, who was out of breath and holding out the completed crossword puzzle, then continued leisurely eating some of the manjuu that Shimako-san's brother had made.

Next to them, the Yellow Rose soeurs were singing and dancing as they performed an old pop song.

(Th-this is ...)

"That's right, the "Water Flea Space" was the home cinema."

Sachiko-sama muttered.

"They must have been given a choreography video and been instructed to master it."

"Ahh ... "

Even though she felt sorry for them, it was funny to watch. Still, the fact that they were able to memorize the dance steps in such a short time showed an incredible power of concentration. Or maybe those two had done that dance previously.

"Well done. That was perfect."

Their dance finished, Sayako-oba-sama applauded the pair heartily.

"I'm ashamed to admit it, but my dad's also a fan so we have the same video at home."

Speaking of Yoshino-san's father, he was the man whose eyes were all red when he came to the kendo tournament to inform them of the results of Yoshino-san's surgery. Yumi's immediate reaction was, "He likes this group ..." - but while he was an older man now, he would have been young when they were popular.

The Yellow Rose team rolled the die and headed to a new room. It looked as though the White Rose team had been back to the room while the Red Rose team were solving the puzzle, as their piece had moved forwards.

"The crossword is correct. Yumi-chan, do the honors."

Yumi rolled the die, praying that it didn't come up as two. Because she now knew what task was awaiting them in the "Water Flea Space."

"Six."

The six landed them on the "Polka-dot Ribbonfish Space."

"The polka-dot ribbonfish is a type of fish, right?"

"Yes. It's a beautiful, sparkling fish that lives in the deep sea."

Sachiko-sama answered promptly, drawing on her vast knowledge.

"My mother, she must have flipped through an encyclopedia and picked the name of whatever animals caught her eye. There's no sense of cohesion whatsoever."

"An encyclopedia ... "

That was sort of how it felt.

On that note, they hadn't yet set eyes on a door with "Polka-dot Ribbonfish Room" written on it. And with that, the pair decided to attack the areas they hadn't visited yet.

The Ogasawara house had several staircases (apparently). They went up a different staircase to the one earlier, chasing the "Polka-dot Ribbonfish."

At last they arrived in front of a traditional Japanese style room. The room at the end of the corridor seemed nondescript, like the one on the ground floor, but here the door was a horizontal slider. Stuck to the sliding door was a poster labeling this the "Polka-dot Ribbonfish Space."

"There isn't usually anything in this room."

Sachiko-sama put her hand on the door. At any rate, without a video player, they could assume they wouldn't be instructed to sing and dance.

"There isn't usually anything in there?"

"Well, there's some traditional clothes in the closet, and we use the room for changing, but – "

Sachiko-sama slid the door open as she answered. Whereupon.

" ... There's something."

On the left-hand side of the six tatami mat sized room was a line of three folded paper cases. On the right-hand side were three folded kimono sashes. In the middle of the room was a basket containing all sorts of small items for use when putting on a kimono.

"What are we supposed to do with this – "

Yumi found this unbelievable and didn't want to make a move since they hadn't seen any instructions, but Sachiko-sama said:

"Yumi. Take your clothes off."

"Wha!?"

"No matter how you look at it, the task has to be to put on one of these kimonos. See."

Sachiko-sama ignored Yumi's surprise and held up an instruction booklet for putting on a kimono that she'd found in the basket.

"All the other groups would be able to follow along with this."

"B-but."

"There's no time. Hurry up and take them off."

Sachiko-sama's hands were already on the hem of her sweater, but Yumi struggled frantically.

"But why does it have to be me?"

"Don't be silly. It's the role of the petit soeur to take on unpleasant tasks like this, right? Besides, if I did it, it'd only change the color of my kimono, and that wouldn't be all that amusing to see."

"Huh. I don't think it matters if it's amusing or not ... "

As she said this, Yumi suddenly realized. That Sayako-oba-sama was expecting nothing less than "amusing." Otherwise, she probably wouldn't have been so happy to watch her daughter's friends singing and dancing.

"You understand? Then be quiet and undress."

No sooner had she said this, then Sachiko-sama went back to taking Yumi's sweater off. Maybe she should just give up. However.

"Wait, wait a minute onee-sama. Can you at least close that door?"

Yumi said, pointing.

The door they'd just entered via was wide open, with the hallway visible on the other side of that gaping rectangle.

"There's only women in the house, you know."

Sachiko-sama quickly glanced over there.

"But, well, it's cold, and we don't want to show the other teams what happens in this room."

So, the door that concealed them from the hallway slid closed.

"Ah."

They both exclaimed simultaneously when the door was fully closed.

What about the door? On the hallway side it had a poster labeling it the "Polka-dot Ribbonfish Space," while on the inside it had a poster with the instructions.

"The petit soeur has to put on one of these kimonos."

That was what they saw.

Sachiko-sama's shoulders shook copiously, while Yumi's drooped copiously.

Part 5

"Oh my – Yumi-chan you're so cute."

Sachiko-sama could easily put on her own kimono but this was her first time dressing someone else, so despite her best efforts struggling with the giant dress-up doll it still took about twenty minutes until Yumi was dressed and her sash was tied.

It was a pretty, long-sleeved kimono, with round, white flowers – perhaps from apricot or peach trees – blossoming on a light pink background.

Sachiko-sama had opened the three folding paper-cases and asked Yumi, "Which one would you like?" The other two were also long-sleeved kimonos, one was golden yellow and the other was a vibrant olive color.

"It makes me so happy to see. Those were kimonos that I wore when I was young. But Sachiko, she won't wear any of the three."

"I've told you, it's because they're too small for me."

Sachiko-sama was a bit peevish now that she was the one under the microscope.

"Oh. But when you were that height you wouldn't wear them either, saying they didn't match your face or you hated the pattern."

"I'm not so sure about that."

"It's true. Ah Yumi-chan, you're so cute."

"Not at all, I should be thanking you for letting me borrow such a precious kimono ... "

For all the joy she'd brought Sayako-oba-sama, her reward was a proportionately squished stomach.

"But still, using the drum bow with a long-sleeved kimono?"

That was the only thing that Sayako-oba-sama seemed to be disappointed by. The drum bow, like its name suggested, was a way of tying the sash such that it looked like she was carrying a rectangular box on her

back. Depending on the length of the sash, it could be split into one or two drums. Incidentally, Yumi's was a two layer drum.

"It would have looked better with a puffed sparrow, or a standing arrow knot."

"I'm unable to tie such complicated knots by myself."

The sash Sachiko-sama was wearing today looked to be tied in something like a paperback knot. On that note, it sounded as though Sachiko-sama could only tie the drum knot or some of the more casual styles with a half-width sash. Which meant that Sayako-oba-sama must have tied her sash today.

"I'm sure the book would have had instructions for tying the sash in it."

"There's no time to waste on such frivolities during the game. Even the drum knot was troublesome."

Given that they'd taken so long, they were surprised when they looked at the sugoroku board and saw that neither of the other teams' pieces had moved. While they were walking back, they'd almost been expecting one of the other teams to have won already.

Just then, the White Rose team appeared.

"We're done. Two cleaning cloths."

Following them, the Yellow Rose team made their entrance too.

"The pancakes are ready."

Cleaning cloths and pancakes.

It looked as though all the teams had been given time-consuming tasks.

Knitting cleaning cloths and making pancakes.

She didn't know where the White Rose team had done their sewing, but the "Woodpecker Space" that the Yellow Rose team's piece occupied was undoubtedly the kitchen.

"Ah, Yumi-san, you look cute."

"What happened? Was this one of the tasks too?"

Everyone crowded around Yumi, despite still being in the middle of the game. After their first look, she was talked into twirling around and posing with her arms out. She felt kind of like a pin-up model.

With her little bit of new-found knowledge, Yumi could see that Shimako-san had her obi sash tied in a one layer drum bow. And when Sayako-oba-sama took off her haori coat, she saw that her sash was tied in a tsuno-dashi bow.

Since it looked as though Yumi was liable to forget about the game completely, Sachiko-sama stepped in front of her and handed her the die.

"Here. Roll. Let's hurry up and win."

Hurry up and win. Sachiko-sama was cocky.

"Okay. I'll roll a big number then."

The last spurt.

Yumi shook the die in her hand violently then flung it out with a, "Come on."

"Stop sitting with your legs apart while you're wearing a kimono."

Sachiko-sama sighed, with her hand on her forehead.

"Ah."

Yumi quickly drew her legs together, but it was too late. She was always going to slip up when she was wearing something unfamiliar.

Outside, the light was already fading.

Part 6

After that, Yumi and Sachiko-sama gradually moved their piece forwards, while folding five origami cranes each and searching for tiddlywink counters amongst Go pieces, until they eventually arrived at two spaces from the end.

In the spot behind them, the Yellow Rose team were waiting their turn. Ahead of them, the White Rose team hadn't rolled the exact number they needed, so they were retracing their steps for the umpteenth time. They were probably folding yet another batch of paper cranes in the "Falcon Space" by now. Although it felt a bit strange to be folding paper cranes in the "Falcon Space."

Now came the Red Rose team's turn to roll the die.

"Two, two, two ... "

Whispering her encouragement, Yumi rolled the die. She threw it with such force that it tumbled around before finally coming to rest in the corridor.

Naturally, everyone followed after it. The game might be settled right there.

"Oh, it's a two."

Sayako-oba-sama said calmly.

"Wha-!"

Clinging to the hallway wall, Yoshino-san's shoulders slumped when she confirmed the roll with her own eyes.

"So that means."

Sachiko-sama muttered.

"The Red Rose team are the winners, right?"

It finally felt real to Yumi when Rei-sama patted her on the shoulder and congratulated her.

"Two, two, it's a two, onee-sama."

Yumi jumped around excitedly, and Sachiko-sama looked stunned and said:

"I know I've told you this before, but you really don't have any composure, do you?"

Watching this, Sayako-oba-sama interjected.

"Sachiko-san just isn't good at showing when she's happy."

"M...mother!"

She spoke gently but that was the sort of thing you'd expect from Sachiko-sama's mother. She knew her daughter well.

But Yumi already knew that. That her onee-sama was in a wonderful mood whenever she corrected her petit soeur like that.

"Well then, the Red Rose team are victorious."

"Oba-sama, what was the prize for the winners?"

Yoshino-san couldn't contain her curiosity, even though she knew the prize wasn't hers. Sayako-oba-sama raised her index finger to her lips.

"I'll announce that when the White Rose team returns."

Then Sachiko-sama made her move.

"In that case, I'll go to the "Falcon Space" to get them."

"Ah, me too."

Yumi chased after Sachiko-sama. She caught up to her in the hallway and stuck to her tightly like a magnet. It was just what she felt like doing, for some reason or another.

"Yumi."



Sachiko-sama said quietly.

"I'm glad that everyone could make it."

"Yeah."

Yumi knew that her onee-sama meant more than just what she'd said.

"Even though they may have already had plans for today. They rearranged their schedules so that we could meet. To cheer me up."

"You've fully grasped the situation. Wonderful."

Yumi thought that she should thank God for blessing her with such incredible friends. And for one more thing.

"But it's burned into my soul that it was you, onee-sama, who made this opportunity happen."

"... Don't be silly."

Sachiko-sama muttered.

"Don't worry about me."

"Okay."

Because her onee-sama was family. It made her simultaneously happy and grateful.

As they were climbing the stairs, she caught sight of the frosted glass windows alongside the main entrance.

Outside, it was already pitch black.

Just then, it felt like something passed in front of the glass. Yumi thought it could have been someone from the sushi store coming to pick up the empty wooden boxes.

Part 7

Neither Shimako-san nor Noriko-chan were in the guest room that was the "Falcon Space." There was just the instruction card with "Fold ten paper cranes and bring them back with you" written on it and the remaining origami paper stacked neatly in the corner of the bedside table.

"They probably went down the other staircase. We must have passed them en-route."

Sachiko-sama shrugged in exasperation. Having multiple staircases had its own problems.

"It seems a waste to just head back like this. I think I'll tidy the room first."

Sachiko-sama picked up the origami paper and instructions.

"Ah, I'll take that."

"It's fine. I can handle this much – "

Then Sachiko-sama quietly said, "Ah."

"What's the matter?"

"No, it's nothing ... Let's go."

Although it didn't look like it was nothing. But nor did it look like it was the sort of desperate situation where she had to do something hasty.

Then, as though nothing was wrong, Sachiko-sama left the room and took down the "Falcon Space" sign that was attached to the door. It was held up with double-sided tape in two places but it came down surprisingly easily.

"Onee-sama, if it's alright with you, may I be excused for a little while to change clothes?"

Yumi said, pointing to the "Ribbonfish Space" further down the corridor.

"Oh? You look so cute, you could keep it on for a little while longer."

"But I'd feel really bad if I got your mother's kimono dirty."

On top of that, the unfamiliar kimono was tight across her stomach.

"Really? Will you be able to undo the sash on your own?"

"... Probably."

Although she didn't know what she should do with the kimono once she'd taken it off.

"In that case, I'll tidy up a couple of other rooms around here and then come and see you. Once you've got the sash off, stay like that and wait for me. I'll take care of the rest."

"Okay."

Yumi answered, then walked off down the corridor. Sachiko-sama entered the room opposite the "Falcon Space."

When she arrived in front of the room, Yumi started by removing the "Polka-dot Ribbonfish Space" sign from the door.

"Alright, let's do this."

When she opened the sliding door, the room was dark. Yumi searched for the light switch that she assumed was around there somewhere. Tactile feedback. With a click, the warm light of the incandescent globe filled the room.

She stepped into the room and closed the door.

"Right, right."

Before she forgot, she took down the instructions from the inner-side of the door. Yumi then set the two signs down in the corner of the room.

In the center of the room there were two kimonos and two obi sashes. In the end, neither of the other teams had made it to this room.

It seemed a bit of a waste, since there had been enough laid out for all the teams. Yumi squatted down and gently ran her fingers across the top of the remaining kimono paper cases.

(... Or rather, how fortunate that the Red Rose team landed on the "Polka-dot Ribbonfish Space.")

Just as a faint chuckle escaped from Yumi's lips, she heard the sound of the door opening. She slowly stood up, thinking it was Sachiko-sama, but as she rose a voice that was obviously not her onee-sama's reached her ears.

"Saako."

By the time she'd recognized it as a man's voice, there was no time to turn around before their hand landed on her shoulder.

Why was there a man here?

Who was this person?

Those sorts of questions came later.

For now, Yumi cried out instinctively. But with all her might.

"Aaargh!!"

And then.

"Oh no!"

Surprised by Yumi's scream, the man whose hand had been on her shoulder fell on his butt. Now that there was some distance between them, Yumi finally turned around and realized who it was.

"Oh – "

But even so, it was now too late to erase the reality of her scream.

"What's the matter!?"

The first person to appear in the doorway was Sachiko-sama, who had been surprised by her petit soeur's scream. Then, shortly afterwards, the rest of the party arrived. Yumi's scream had obviously carried all the way to the first-floor Japanese-style room.

"What happened ... ah."

Upon discovering Yumi standing immobile in the spacious traditional-style room and a man fallen on his backside a short distance away, about half of the people had the same reaction. The other half didn't understand, and looked at this unknown intruder in fright.

"I heard someone scream just now!?"

For some reason, there was one more person. Yumi was thrown into confusion when she saw this latecomer.

It was supposed to be a women-only New Year's party, so why were there two men here? This was probably the same question that all the women had, not just Yumi.

Before any of the women could ask this, the young latecomer addressed the fallen man.

" ... What are you doing, uncle?"

"I could ask you the same question."

Despite the age difference, they had remarkably similar faces and bearings.

Nearly Far? Or Distantly Near?

Part 1

Statement from Mr. A (approx. 50 y.o.)

It was only during my late lunch that I noticed that I'd forgotten to bring my glasses.

I don't usually wear them. Only when I'm traveling or driving my car.

I left home some time after 10. I'd booked a taxi, since I thought I might be drinking, and when he arrived I got in, told him the destination and immediately closed my eyes.

I met the person I was going to see in the hotel lounge and, after about as long as it takes to have a cup of coffee, we headed to the restaurant.

It's a hidden place that operates almost exclusively for members but I like it because you can get a quiet meal there even during hectic times like Christmas or New Year's. It was after I was led to my usual private room and handed the menu that I realized that I didn't have my glasses.

I've been slightly near-sighted since my youth but recently I've found it harder to read small print. If the menu had been in Japanese I would have been able to more or less figure out the names of the dishes, but it was in French and that brought me to my knees. The blurry letters made me want to abandon my struggle to comprehend.

But even so, I had to do something. I asked my dining companion if there was anything they couldn't eat, then left the entire order up to our waiter.

My eyesight hasn't deteriorated to the point where eating is a challenge. That said, I didn't know how many more times I'd need them before my planned return home tomorrow evening. At any rate, I decided to get my glasses and come back.

We'd arranged to go shopping together after lunch, but I called it off after the third store and got in a taxi. I keep a pair of glasses at the office too, but I didn't really want to go there since it was the New Year's break. It

would cause trouble for the security guards and, since I'd banned anyone from going to work during the New Year's break, it'd be a pain if my subordinates found out. So, by the process of elimination, the only option remaining was home.

Well, of course I knew they were holding a women-only New Year's party here. But as long as I didn't intrude (or rather, wasn't an intrusion) I thought it'd be fine if I entered quietly, got my glasses, and then left quietly.

I got out of the taxi on the public road in front of the house. After that, I entered my PIN at the gate to open it, then unlocked the front door with my key. Usually, someone would do this for me, so it was a somewhat novel experience.

At any rate, I entered the house and went straight up the stairs. I thought the party would be held in the first-floor traditional Japanese room. I was curious, but I thought I'd better not make an appearance. So I silently made my way to the second floor.

Naturally, I'm terribly sorry that I surprised Yumi-chan so.

But, as you can see from this, I hadn't meant any harm so I hope she'll forgive me.

Statement from Mr. B (19 y.o.)

Usually, most occupants are out of the house on the second of January, leaving just the mother and her daughter, so it's only natural for a man who's usually close to them to get worried and come and see how they're doing.

Well, of course I knew that this year they were holding a women-only New Year's party. I'd been told, "No men," beforehand. By who? The two ladies of the Ogasawara household. Separately, on different occasions. Quite on guard, no?

Which naturally leads to the question, what am I doing here in spite of that? It's because I just happened to go to the department store today to check out a certain item. While I was looking, I was struck by a desire to bring the women a gift for their party, so I casually came over. That's why.

Obviously, after I'd given them the gift I was going to return home immediately. I mean, it shouldn't matter as long as I don't take part, right? Would they stop the sushi delivery guy from going beyond the front gate just because he's a man? No, they wouldn't. It's the same as that.

I'm a student, so taking a taxi was out of the question. Naturally, I caught the train. Then walked here from the station.

When I came in sight of the Ogasawara house's front gate, I passed an empty taxi going the other way. Thinking about it now, that must have been the car that my uncle took. Although I didn't think much of it back then.

I was going to use the intercom but the door was already open. Since I'm so familiar with this place, I just sort of walked inside then closed the door. Because leaving it open was insecure.

It was dark, so I didn't see anyone walking ahead of me. And there was a bit of wind, so I couldn't hear any footsteps either.

The door looked to be unlocked, but I wouldn't have felt right about entering like that, so I rang the bell. But just then, I heard a scream from inside.

It was a woman's scream, so I went running in without thinking.

Which brings us to now.

Were there any questions?

None for me, right?

– So that's how it happened.

Although it would be more accurate to label the Mr A section as "Ogasawara Tooru" and the Mr B section as "Kashiwagi Suguru."
(However.)

Mr A. If he'd rung the buzzer before entering the house, even if it had been an unwelcome intrusion for the women, it still wouldn't have turned into as big an incident as this. Well, since she hadn't recognized the man of the house and had screamed out like she was being attacked by a molester, Yumi was at least a little bit –

"Yumi did nothing wrong."

Sachiko-sama asserted clearly. Saying that in an emergency, there was no time to leisurely confirm the situation before screaming.

"You got that, Yumi? When something like this happens – of course, we hope it'll never happen again, but if it does, you should scream like you did just now. It doesn't matter if you realize it was a misunderstanding afterward. Because at that point you can apologize."

"Yes, onee-sama."

The pair looked at each other, holding hands tightly.

"Uncle, are you okay? You were totally acting like a degenerate."

Kashiwagi-san poked Tooru-oji-sama in the shoulder.

"Huh?"

"I think your explanation just now was a bit lacking. We know the details of why you returned home, but there was absolutely no explanation as for why you put your hands on Yumi-chan. The drawn out passage about the restaurant and shopping doesn't really matter in this event. Let's just accept that you came back to the house to get your glasses. But you completely left out everything between then and Yumi-chan's scream. As one of the few men present in the house right now, I very much want to be on your side, uncle, but as it stands that's just not possible. Because, looking at it objectively, I can't see any relation whatsoever between your glasses and Yumi-chan."

Indeed. Except for the kimonos, it didn't look like there was anything special in this room, so it seemed unlikely that Tooru-oji-sama's glasses would be kept here. And obviously, if he was looking for his glasses, then there was no need to touch Yumi.

The room had been fully lit and if his eyesight had deteriorated to the point where he had to fumble around as he walked then he would have noticed he'd forgotten his glasses long before he looked at the restaurant's menu.

Now, how would he explain his way out of this?

"Oji-sama ... "

Depending on his answer, Rei-sama looked ready to visit divine retribution on him as she held a long, thin vacuum cleaner tube out in front of her. Just as expected from a second-level kendo swordswoman. As usual, her stance was captivating.

(... huh, what? Vacuum cleaner?)

Bonus.

Statement from Miss C. (18 y.o.)

With the game over, it seemed like a good time to take a break so we decided to have tea and sweets. Sayako-oba-sama graciously offered to prepare the tea.

But my hand slipped and I accidentally dropped the small tea caddy. Yeah, the contents went spilling out everywhere.

It was a mess, the powdered green tea all over the tatami mats. I rushed to get the vacuum cleaner and vacuum it up.

I heard Yumi-chan's scream just when I was turning the vacuum off. So I started running to the second-floor, and at that time I instinctively grabbed the vacuum cleaner's hilt – ah, the tube or pipe or whatever, basically the long, thing plastic bit that's joined to the intake.

So that's why I was carrying that.

– And that tube was now pointed at just one man.

"Wait, h-hold on a minute! Believe me, Rei-chan. I'm Sachiko's father, for heaven's sake. I'd never think of doing anything bad to Sachiko's cute little sister."

Finally realizing the situation, he held his hands out in front of him, gesturing for her to stop. But this wasn't going to be resolved with some vague explanation like, "I'd never think of doing that."

"Then explain it so that everyone can understand."

Rei-sama pressed him, raising the tube overhead.

"Um, how to put this ... it was on impulse."

"On impulse!? On impulse, you put your hands on her shoulder? Not even in a crowded train. In a spacious room."

At times like these, a person's character counts for everything. Women everywhere would find it hard to simply believe the words of a man who (allegedly) kept (multiple) mistresses.

However.

"I believe you."

Yumi said. Then.

"Yumi!"

"Yumi-san!"

"Yumi-chan!"

"Yumi-sama!"

All the gazes that had been leveled at Tooru-oji-sama instantly shifted to Yumi.

"Yumi. Are you protecting my father?"

Sachiko-sama asked, her expression conflicted.

It wasn't as though she didn't believe her father. But the fact that he'd touched her petit soeur was a fact. Sachiko-sama's expression showed her bewilderment by her inability to reconcile those two concepts.

"I'm not protecting him or anything."

Yumi declared. If things kept lurching on like this it would just become even more tangled, so she thought she should try to untangle things. She felt bad for Sachiko-sama and wanted it straightened out quickly, although that's not to say she didn't also feel sorry for Tooru-oji-sama being unilaterally condemned.

"He probably mistook me for someone else."

"Why do you think that?"

Sayako-oba-sama, who had remained silent until then, approached Yumi and inquired.

"Because he said, 'Saako,' before he put his hand on my shoulder."

"Saako ... "

Sayako-oba-sama repeated, as though mentally digesting it.

"Saako, is that Sachiko?"

Rei-sama asked Sachiko-sama. "Sachiko" becomes "Saako." A nickname used at home.

Yumi thought that too. That the father had thought it was his daughter and called out to her.

However.

"It's not me."

Sachiko-sama responded coldly.

"Then – "

Who? Everyone's gaze once again settled on Tooru-oji-sama. Then.

"It's me."

A voice called from somewhere else.

"Oba-sama!?"

Everyone's gaze shifted again quickly. The voice's owner, Sayako-oba-sama, looked down, her face on fire.

"I'm Saako."

"Wha!?"

Indeed. If "Sachiko" was not "Saako," then "Sayako" would probably be the next suspect. But. For some reason, it was hard to accept it without comment. With all due respect, it was hard to believe that this couple who had been married for so long would, really, with all due respect, call each other by pet names. Judging by Sachiko-sama's expression, this was something that even their daughter, who lived in the same house as them, was hearing for the first time.

"He mistook you for me. Because you were wearing one of my old kimonos, Yumi-chan. From the outset, I thought there was a chance it was this, but – "

From the outset, she said.

"Why didn't you say anything until now?"

Quick as a flash, Sachiko-sama interrupted her mother.

"I'm sorry. But, it may have been my vanity."

Her voice seemed to disappear as she got quieter and quieter.

"And what about you, uncle? Why didn't you just say so?"

Kashiwagi-san, the only other male present, also looked stunned as he asked this.

"It was embarrassing to admit that I embraced her because I mistook her for my wife."

Well, you've said it now. Uncle.

But, he'd mistaken her for his wife. Hearing this, Yumi's cheeks reddened. And Yumi wasn't the only one – her friends didn't know how to react either.

Naturally, Rei-sama deflated after being so tightly wound, and laid the plastic pipe down on the tatami mat.

"So that's what happened. I'm sorry, Yumi-chan."

Sayako-oba-sama used her hand to get Tooru-oji-sama to quickly bow his head.

"Ah, no, I should be the one to apologize."

Even as she said it, she knew it was a strange thing to say. But, now that the truth had come out, she remembered how overly loud her initial scream had been and it just slipped out.

Part 2

"It seems the misunderstanding has been cleared up. Us interfering gentlemen should take our leave."

Kashiwagi-san said, taking his uncle by the arm.

"Right. Sorry everyone for putting a dampener on your fun New Year's party."

The slightly dispirited gent raised his hands in apology.

As she watched them go, Yoshino-san said, "I thought this was an open event," which may or may not have been intended as a joke.

"Wait."

Sachiko-sama called out to the two men who were heading towards the staircase. Yumi wondered what was going on as Sachiko-sama walked over to Kashiwagi-san and quietly conversed with him.

"Suguru-san ... do you mind if we have that talk?"

"Now? I don't mind, but do you want to do this when your grandfather's not here?"

"We can tell my grandfather when he gets home. But I'd rather do it now."

Yumi was a bit jealous that Kashiwagi-san knew exactly what Sachiko-sama was talking about when she said "that talk." But Yumi reconsidered and calmed herself down when their grandfather was mentioned, since it seemed like it would be a serious and weighty conversation.

"What's this about?"

Sayako-oba-sama asked.

"With Suguru-san here, as well as both you and father, this seems like a good chance to have a talk."

"Hmm."

Tooru-oji-sama adjusted his collar and turned towards Sachiko-sama.

Since she was neither Sachiko-sama's mother or father, nor Kashiwagi-san, Yumi was worried about whether it was okay for her to hear this

conversation, but she hadn't been told to leave and the other party members were still there so for now she decided to stay where she was and listen. At that point, for some unknown reason, Rei-sama quietly made her way to Yumi's side.

"?"

"Don't worry, it's alright."

Rei-sama whispered quietly. Then she motioned with her jaw showing that the conversation was about to start, just as Sachiko-sama opened her mouth to speak.

"Suguru-san and I would like to wipe clean the slate of our engagement."

(Wha-!?)

Naturally, Yumi shrieked. But just before her shriek could escape, her mouth was blocked by the palm of Rei-sama's hand so that no sound could escape.

"See."

It looked as though Rei-sama had made her way over because she'd predicted just such a situation. No doubt Sachiko-sama would have found it rude to be interrupted by a third-party while she was conversing with her parents. Yoshino-san, the other dangerous character, had covered her mouth with her own hand. Shimako-san and Noriko-chan had also reacted, but their voices weren't loud enough to interrupt the conversation.

Then there was the reaction of Sachiko-sama's mother and father.

"Huh?"

There wasn't that much shock, just a small tilt of the head in confusion.

"We've talked about it together. That was our conclusion."

Sachiko-sama continued. Even if her parents' reaction wasn't quite what she expected, she seemed anxious to convey the message fully. Kashiwagi-san remained standing silently beside Sachiko-sama, but his expression was like he was looking at something far away.

"Wipe clean?"

"That's fine, right? They're both still young."

Mr. and Mrs. Ogasawara said to each other.

"So ... is that all?"

Sachiko-sama asked.

"What do you mean?"

Tooru-oji-sama asked, as though to say, "How else should we have reacted?"

"You're not opposed to this?"

"Opposed? Why would we be?"

This time it was Sayako-oba-sama that responded.

"Because, if Suguru-san and I marry, the Ogasawara group will – "

Right. There had been talk of entrusting the Ogasawara group to them.

"Why are you thinking about that? Suguru doesn't have to be married into the Ogasawara family to work at the company. While your grandfather does appear to favor Suguru as his successor, he's not stubborn enough to force his only granddaughter into a marriage she doesn't want. Even if neither of you sought employment with the Ogasawara group, there's other people it could be left to. There's plenty of talented people in our company."

Tooru-oji-sama said smoothly. Whatever will be, will be.

(Huh, but then –)

"So then, why did you make us get engaged?"

Sachiko-sama asked her parents. That was what Yumi wanted to hear too.

"Oh my, you've forgotten?"

"Forgotten what?"

"Basically, you told Kashiwagi's older sister that you desperately wanted to be his wife."

"Wha!?"

Now this was a rare sight, Sachiko-sama's mouth was open wide in amazement.

"That's right. So please don't make out as though we were forcing this on you."

"Huh ... I didn't know that."

Kashiwagi-san mumbled. With a wee bit of delight.

"When did I say that!?"

Sachiko-sama's face reddened. Like she was a bit angry.

"I think it was back when Sachiko-san was in kindergarten."

"Yes, that sounds about right."

Sachiko-sama's parents had faraway looks as they spoke. They were probably remembering Sachiko-sama back when she was little.

"But that was so long ago. I can't be held accountable for that."

"Oh? But since you never said anything, we thought you still loved Suguru-san. That's why we don't have a problem with what you've just told us."

They'd been told that Sachiko-sama and Kashiwagi-san shared such feelings, but if they didn't share them then it was only natural they'd grow apart. Looking at it from that angle, Sachiko-sama's parents hadn't been interfering in their relationship at all.

"... So that was it."

Sachiko-sama mumbled, deflated. It had obviously taken a lot of courage and determination for her to broach this topic. But despite that, it had been settled far too quickly.

"Oh, don't be so disappointed. I'm glad that you told us. Because you always find it so hard to talk about the most important things."

Sayako-oba-sama said, putting her arm around her daughter's shoulders.

"At any rate, we understand your feelings. I'll think of something to tell your grandfather."

However, Sachiko-sama refused Tooru-oji-sama's offer.

"No, father. I'll speak to him when he gets home."

"... I see. You're okay with that?"

"Yes."

Sachiko-sama obviously thought that this was her business, so she would see it through to the end. Besides, Sachiko-sama's doting grandfather would obviously much prefer to hear the words from her lips.

"Well, now we really should be on our way, I suppose. Oh, right, Suguru. I'll call a taxi, so it can drop you at the station on the way."

"Alright. I'll go with you then."

After using the first-floor phone to call for a taxi, the two men waited in the entrance. When the time came for them to leave, they were seen off by a bevy of women.

"Ah, wait a minute, Tooru-san."

Sayako-oba-sama came clattering down the stairs, having slipped away unnoticed some time earlier.

"Here, you forgot your glasses. You came home to get them but then they slipped your mind."

"Ah, that's right. Thank-you."

Tooru-oji-sama took the glasses case he was offered and put it in his coat pocket. And then:

"Ah."

Kashiwagi-san quietly exclaimed.

"I just remembered something. Ah where is it?"

Kashiwagi-san looked restlessly around the entrance before spotting a small paper bag in the corner and picking it up, saying, "There it is." It seemed likely that he'd dropped this after he arrived, when he heard Yumi's scream.

"Here, Sacchan."

"Huh?"

Sachiko-sama looked blankly when he offered it to her.

"I said this before, right? It's a present from me. You can share it with everyone later."

"I wonder what it could be."

As she said this, Sachiko-sama slid her finger through the tape lightly holding the bag closed and peeked inside. From Yumi's position, she couldn't tell what was inside. The bag was rather small for sweets and it wasn't that thick either.

"Mmm."

Sachiko-sama's face brightened the moment she realized what the gift was.

"Thank-you, Suguru-san. It's a wonderful gift."

What on earth could it be that made her so happy? Since he'd told her to share it with everyone, Yumi would probably find out some time today. But would someone other than Sachiko-sama be that happy to receive it? She had absolutely no way to tell, though.

"Ah, right. I'm going skiing with my uni buddies from the morning of the fifth."

Kashiwagi-san suddenly announced his schedule. Even though nobody had asked.

"Huh?"

"So if there's anything you need me to do, I'd appreciate if you let me know by the day before that. I'll be at home on the afternoon of the fourth."

"Will you be away for long? Are you going overseas?"

Sachiko-sama asked back. Indeed, from what Kashiwagi-san had said, it wasn't obvious when he'd next be contactable after the fourth.

"No, just for four days. In the Tohoku region."

"I doubt there's anything that urgent that I'd need you for."

And it was only domestic travel, so it shouldn't take too long for him to return. Yumi didn't understand why he was informing his relatives of such an absence.

"I suppose. But the winter break will be over by the time I return."

"So?"

"That's all. I'll pick you up a souvenir."

"That won't be necessary."

Sachiko-sama smiled. Just don't break a leg, alright?

Even though they'd just canceled their engagement, they looked to be closer than ever.

A Chill Breeze

Part 1

"Would you like soba or udon for dinner?"

Sayako-oba-sama asked, after they'd seen off the two gentlemen and returned to the Japanese-styled room.

"No."

As expected, Sachiko-sama, Rei-sama and Yumi all declined.

"Why don't we start by finishing off what's left here? If we're still hungry after, we can think about what to have then, right Sachiko?"

"Right, right. There's rice in the cold room, so if absolutely necessary we could make rice and tea, or rice gruel."

"Agreed!"

The three of them knew that if Sayako-oba-sama got it in her head to cook something, it would most likely turn into an extravagant affair.

For example.

If she wanted to have some bread, she'd start by measuring out the wheat flour.

She would intend to make a boxed lunch, but it would turn into dinner.

She'd made enough mille-feuille that they had a mountain left over even after sharing it with other families.

As a result, they couldn't rule out the possibility that if she made udon or soba, she'd start by grinding the flour and it wouldn't be ready until late into the night, or, if she did use pre-made noodles, that she would cook so much of it that they'd be eating it for the next three days. – Such was the terror of Sayako-oba-sama's cooking.

And there was still food left over on the table from when the party had started. There was no need to add any more to this amount. It made Yumi queasy just thinking about it.

"I suppose ... "

Sayako-oba-sama tentatively acceded to their persuasion.

"But I've already had enough of that."

Unaware of the situation, Yoshino-san spoke her mind.

"That's for sure."

Finding a strong ally, Sayako-oba-sama staged a revival.

"How about you, Shimako-chan and Noriko-chan? Would you like something different to eat?"

"Umm – "

The focus shifted to the bewildered White Rose soeurs. Indeed, they probably would prefer something different to eat. But they were wise and mature enough to realize that there was something that Sachiko-sama, Rei-sama and Yumi were desperately trying to avoid.

"Um, well, I think it would be a shame to waste what we have – "

Indeed. From a moral point of view, that was the conclusion that mature people would arrive at.

"Then it's settled. Let's reheat it."

Rei-sama stood up, declaring the matter settled by majority rule, five against two. Yumi stood up too.

With this sort of thing, the sooner they started the better. Lingering just led to –

"But still."

Despite not lingering, the opposing faction kept trying to overturn the decision.

"Doesn't it sound like they're just trying to endure it? Really, they've had enough too. That's why they said what they did about not letting it go to waste, right?"

Yoshino-san quickly pointed out. The White Rose soeurs couldn't object, since it probably wasn't entirely wrong. Rei-chan had been on her way to the kitchen but doubled back, sighing as she addressed Yoshino-san.

"Alright, let me ask you, what do you think we should do, Yoshino? Should we have soba or udon, turning a blind eye to the small amount of

pizza, yakisoba, sandwiches and other items remaining and throwing them away? "

"... Well, where's the problem with having it for breakfast tomorrow?"

Yoshino-san answered, turning sulky.

"That kind of short-sighted thinking, delaying something undesirable because you're solely chasing after short term fun, never works. And when tomorrow comes, you're just going to say that you don't want to eat it then, right? You're always doing this, Yoshino – "

Ah – now it had started. This pattern of events, where they each said what they wanted and didn't back down, wasn't going to lead to a resolution. Typically, Yoshino-san would resort to violence in the end. But this wasn't their home. They should probably show some restraint – well, they'd probably forgotten that already. Yumi started to think about how she should stop this.

"Won't you stop your sisterly quarreling?"

Sachiko-sama forced her way in to the conversation.

"We're just talking about what to eat, right?"

Just talking about what to eat, but be that as it may, they were talking about what to eat. Having been told to stop, they entered into something of a ceasefire, but neither side was giving an inch.

"Um, how about we search for a compromise, that meets both of your requirements?"

Noriko-chan offered up a plan for resolving the matter.

"Our requirements?"

"Right. Basically, you don't want these leftovers kept for later, right?"

" ... Yeah, I suppose."

Things would get even more confused if they were to mention Sayako-oba-sama's cooking, so the correct response was not to say anything. At any rate, as long as it didn't involve cooking anything new, it wasn't wrong.

"And Yoshino-sama has had enough of this food and wants something that tastes different."

"Right. But, is there any compromise possible that accommodates those two points?"

"That is the question."

Despite it being her suggestion, apparently Noriko-chan hadn't followed it through to any concrete conclusion either. The contradiction was they had to eat the leftovers, while eating something different. So, how should they settle this?

"Ah."

Yumi had a flash of inspiration.

"I know. We just have to use the leftovers to make something that tastes different!"

"Huh?"

Everyone looked at Yumi with suspicion. As if to say that it might be fine for just one dish, but how would they use the wide variety of leftovers?

"Well ... "

Despite being the one to say it, Yumi had no confidence either. But Rei-sama alone sided with her.

"No, we can do it."

"You can't make something that tastes awful just for the sake of making something different."

"Well, come and watch."

So, with that, they all moved to the kitchen and the Rei-sama Cooking Show began. It was definitely a show. Even Yumi, who had volunteered to be her assistant, got a good look at Rei-sama's incredible skills up-close.

"Yumi-chan, crack open an egg. Then add some honey and fresh cream ... ah, milk would be fine too."

Rei-sama made a mixture like that used in French toast, soaked the sandwiches Sachiko-sama made in it, then cooked them in a frying-pan until they were golden brown.

"There, the French sandwiches are done. Yumi-chan, next I'll need you to dissolve some flour in water. Ah, Sachiko, where do you keep the herbs and spices?"

"Ah, here, chef."

Sayako-oba-sama cheerfully held out a rack containing lots of small spice jars. Initially she'd been on the same side as Yoshino-san, but it looked as though the cooking show had been so interesting that she'd switched allegiances. On closer inspection, everyone other than Yoshino-san had been converted into Rei-sama's assistants.

Step by step, the remaining yakisoba, takoyaki, okonomiyaki and exploded calamari were roughly chopped and added to the flour mixture.

"The pizza ... is okay too, I guess."

In the end, the French fries, Sayako-oba-sama's salad and the de-boned chicken were all submerged in the sludge.

"What's the point in chopping up the okonomiyaki, just to make okonomiyaki?"

Yoshino-san snorted, anticipating what would happen next.

"It doesn't really matter what it's called."

Rei-sama laughed, and shot back. Apparently it looked like she really was going to use the leftovers to make okonomiyaki. Yumi had been thinking that this was a possibility, and it looked to be the case.

"You just wanted it to taste different, right, Yoshino?"

Rei-sama took some of the jars of spices and added random amounts (or so it looked, but she might have calculated it) of seasoning. As a result, the white sludge turned into a yellow sludge.

That smell was:

"Curry!"

"Ding-ding-ding, Yumi-chan. Now, let's cook it."

Rei-sama quickly cooked the curry-flavored okonomiyaki in the pan she'd used earlier for the French sandwiches.

"Get it while it's hot."

With that, everyone quickly returned to the party room and sampled the food.

"Ooh."

The French sandwiches were incredible – they were sweet, and the cheese in the middle had melted just a smidgen. Since the theme was leftovers, they'd also taken the opportunity to toast the crusts that Sachiko-sama had cut off when she made the sandwiches. Smothered in maple syrup, they were so delicious that it was hard to believe they were castoffs.

The curry-flavored okonomiyaki ended up like some foreign cuisine. She'd been worried about the addition of the potato salad and the French fries, but they made a nice counterpoint. It was pretty much impossible to tell that it was a re-use of leftovers.

"Oh well."

Amidst all the praise, Yoshino-san was the only one with a sour look on her face.

"It's so annoying. Rei-chan's cooking is good."

Apparently she'd been planning on laughing and saying, "I told you so," if the food had been awful. But still, it should be far, far better to be annoyed and eat something delicious than it would be to laugh and eat something awful.

That's Yoshino-san for you.

Part 2

After dinner, Sayako-oba-sama led them in the tea ceremony and they ate the majuu buns and chocolates and lollies that Yumi had brought, then after that they all helped to tidy up.

Washing the dishes, vacuuming the floor, wiping the tables. It wasn't all that different to what they did in the Rose Mansion, but the change of location made it feel somewhat special.

The excitement they felt as they worked was probably due to this being an overnight trip. Usually, no matter how much fun they had together as friends, when evening came they had to return to their own homes.

But tonight they could stay up talking for as long as they liked. If they were feeling drowsy, they could sleep. If they were feeling awake, they could stay up all the way through to daybreak if they wanted.

Such fun.

Such happiness.

And yet.

Why was it that the moment she thought about happiness, a chill breeze seemed to blow through her heart?

Her feelings of fun and happiness weren't fake. They were one hundred per-cent genuine.

"It's in a different room to your other feelings, right?"

Yoshino-san said.

"Huh!?"

Yumi asked, startled.

"Did I just say something!?"

"Yeah. Something about how you were having fun and feeling happy, but there was a cold wind blowing."

Noriko-chan answered.

"... That's not good."

She'd been talking to herself even though there were two other people beside her.

The three boutons were heading to the bath. That said, it's not like they were all going to a public bathhouse together.

Setting aside Sayako-oba-sama, the girls were using the three separate baths in two shifts. Coming up with groups was troublesome, so in times like these they usually just split into groups based on the Rose colors. Then, in accordance with Lillian's tradition, the older girls were given preference. Thus, the second shift of Yoshino-san, Yumi and Noriko-chan were walking together. It was about time that their onee-samas should be getting out of the bath.

With the kimono off and her body released, Yumi was feeling looser – and apparently her mouth was feeling looser as well.

"And? What about this room for my feelings?"

After Yumi recited the words she'd heard some time earlier, Yoshino-san started to explain.

"Well, for example, even if your "Onee-sama room" and "Friends room" are full to bursting, if there's another room that's empty you might still feel like something's missing."

"Another room?"

"The petit soeur room."

"I don't have that room."

She'd never had a petit soeur. There shouldn't be a petit soeur room. If the room had been there before, then she should have felt that breeze blowing the whole year, since she didn't have a petit soeur.

"Not yet."

Yoshino-san smiled.

"But you've been renovating for Touko-chan. Recently."

"Oh."

"That's how it is. Right, Shimako-san?"

"Huh? Shimako-san?"

Yumi looked around, wondering where Shimako-san was, just as Shimako-san emerged from the guest room and called out to her petit soeur, saying, "Sorry for making you wait, Noriko."

"That's how it is? ... How what is?"

Shimako-san asked, as she held onto the towel wrapped around her wet hair. Just like she'd said earlier, her sleeping clothes were pajamas and not a yukata.

"I want to ask you about how you felt when you made Noriko-chan your petit soeur. Did it decrease how much you liked us, your friends?"

Shimako-san answered, "Not one bit," to Yoshino-san's question.

"Then, all your feelings for your onee-sama, were they redirected towards Noriko-chan?"

"It wasn't like that at all. It had nothing to do with the Yamayurikai members or my onee-sama – my thoughts and feelings for them didn't change from before to after I met Noriko-chan."

After she'd said this, Shimako-san mumbled, "Ah, I see."

"That's what you were saying, right Yoshino-san? In that case, yes, that's how it is. The house they were living in stayed as it was. But the number of people had increased, so it was like the rooms in the house increased accordingly."

"So a renovation?"

"Something like that."

Yoshino-san nodded, satisfied.

"So even though Yumi-san's built a room, she doesn't have a petit soeur to occupy it, so there's a cold breeze blowing through her heart right now. It's only natural. So don't worry about why it's happening. That's not a good thing to do. Put all your effort into getting ready."

Yumi looked on in admiration while Shimako-san also inhaled audibly.

"That was a good speech, Yoshino-san."

"It's because I'm currently doing some renovations of my own."

"I see."

When Spring came, Yoshino-san was planning on making Arima Nana-chan, who was two years her junior, her petit soeur. That may have been why she could understand Yumi's feelings.

A person's heart as a house?

Thinking about it like that made it easy to understand.

It really hit home when she was climbing into the bath that Sachiko-sama had used.

That her onee-sama's room and her friends' rooms were, indeed, so full to bursting that nothing more could fit in.

Part 3

When she got out of the bath and returned to the Japanese-style room, she saw that the futons were already laid out.

"Ooh."

Feeling excited, she impulsively dived onto them. Her stern onee-sama was missing, so she moved her arms and legs like she was swimming freestyle for a bit. Although, naturally, she didn't get anywhere.

The futons were arranged in two rows of three, with all of the pillows towards the center. In other words, everyone's face would be visible when they tossed around in their sleep.

Last year there had been three girls so they only had one row, and with two rows it was a bit tight. They could open up one of the sliding doors to join two rooms together, but with the extra space it would be colder and, above all else, it was more fun to have the futons right next to each other on these sort of overnight stays anyway.

The table and their luggage were in the next room, beyond the sliding door. Last year, that was where Kashiwagi-san and Yuuki's futons had been laid out. And then. And then – .

(Huh?)

She felt there was one more event before bedtime.

(What was it?)

The pillow-fight was between the boys. Getting wrapped up in her futon by Sei-sama was after the lights were turned off. But hadn't there been something before that?

(Umm.)

There was something before the lights were switched off. From memory, Sayako-oba-sama had come to see them –

(Ah.)

"I know. It was Nagakiyo."

"Nagakiyo?"

Shimako-san, hanging her wet towel up on a hanger, was the first to ask. Then everyone joined in, asking, "What's this?"

"You write out a palindrome that starts with "Nagakiyo" and put it under your pillow. It's a charm to make your first dream of the year a good one."

While Yumi was explaining, the sliding door to the hallway opened and Sachiko-sama entered.

"Oh my, you remembered it all."

"Ahaha."

As she was feeling good about being praised, Sachiko-sama rebuked her.

"But be that as it may, why are you sprawled out across so many futons? Pick one place to sleep already."

"Oka~y."

No mention was made of her swimming antics and she obediently stood up, off the futons. Sachiko-sama smiled gently and said, "Can you all come with me for a minute," and beckoned them into the next room. In her hand she held the paper bag that Kashiwagi-san had given her.

"Although you fold the paper into a sailing boat after you write the palindrome on it."

Once everyone had sat down at the table, Sachiko-sama continued to speak.

"Remember how one of the squares in the sugoroku game earlier had instructions to fold paper cranes? That used up most of the origami paper we had in the house."

Since it was close to the final square, one of the teams that landed on it had to keep going back there again and again because they couldn't roll the number they needed, resulting in them making a surprisingly large number of origami cranes. About the amount you'd make for a sick loved one.

"And we used most of the decorative paper in my room for nagakiyo last year."

"Um, in that case, couldn't we just use lined paper or wrapping paper? Cut it into a square and it's just the same as origami paper."

Noriko-chan said, after raising her hand.

"Yes. That's what I was thinking too. That we'd have to do that. But, there's no need. See."

Then Sachiko-sama placed the paper bag from before on top of the table.

"It's Suguru-san's gift."

From inside, she pulled out pieces of beautiful decorative paper. They were all different colors and patterns. As the brightly colored paper was spread out across the table, it was just like watching a huge patchwork tapestry being made.

Kashiwagi-san had probably been thinking of Nagakiyo when he bought these. Although he wouldn't have known that they'd be low on origami paper.

Perhaps he'd been imagining Sachiko-sama's smiling face as she looked at the pretty paper.

Perhaps he was satisfied just by giving the gift and wouldn't have minded if Sachiko-sama hadn't happily accepted it.

But Sachiko-sama had been overjoyed to receive this. Kashiwagi-san was again showing Yumi his maturity.

"My mother's already taken a piece of paper so choose whichever you like. There's calligraphy pens and felt-tip pens over here."

At first everyone was acting restrained, but this was a gathering of girls. Soon they were all chattering away as they picked their favorite piece of paper. Unusually, even Rei-sama was in high spirits. Apparently she quite liked this sort of thing.

"Yumi. Write out the poem for everyone to copy."

"Ah, okay."

At Sachiko-sama's prompting, Yumi reached for the closest piece of paper. She turned it over and wrote on the back, so as not to blemish the lovely pattern.

Na-ka-ki-yo-no (Of the long night)

To-o-no-ne-fu-ri-no mi-na-me-sa-me (everyone awakens from a distant sleep)

Na-mi-no-ri-fu-ne-no (the surfing boat's)

O-to-no-yo-ki-ka-na (pleasant sounds)

"See? It reads the same forwards as backwards."

Yumi put on a little bit of a patronizing air, having learned this a little bit before the others.

"I see. Like a long version of to-ma-to."

"Shi-n-bu-n-shi."

"Ko-i-ke Ke-i-ko ... -san."

"Ah, we have someone with that name in our grade."

She felt like she'd heard this conversation somewhere before. It looked as though they all thought alike.

Once everyone had copied the poem, Yumi started folding her paper into a boat. Just by saying it was a sailing boat, the group was split into those that knew and those that didn't. Those that didn't know the sailing boat probably wouldn't know the double-hull canoe either.

"Well, do you know how to make a pinwheel?"



"Yeah."

Those that didn't know – the Yellow Rose petit soeur Yoshino-san – said, "Like this, right?" and folded a pinwheel.

"Then you fold that diagonally like this."

By following Yumi's instructions, Yoshino-san's sailboat was completed.

"Ah, we call this the trick boat at home."

With that, she had Yumi hold the tip of the sail and said, "Like this," and folded the prow of the sailboat down, turning the sail into the prow. It was a child's game, to take turns playing the trick on each other. That sort of simple game could keep children interested for quite a while.

Their sleeping positions were decided by ladder-lottery. Yumi was in the middle of the bottom row, with Noriko-chan on her left and Rei-sama on her right. In the top row, Yoshino-san was in first position, Shimako-san in the middle and Sachiko-sama in third. Soeurs and classmates were all completely split up.

"I'm turning out the lights."

Sachiko-sama said.

"Huh!?"

This came from the bouton trio. They wanted to stay awake for longer. They wanted to talk some more. They didn't want their fun time to be ended completely by turning the lights off.

"We have to wake up at 6:30 tomorrow, so we should get to bed early."

"6:30!?"

Yoshino-san grumbled, "We don't even have school tomorrow." That's when Yumi remembered that they'd woken up early last year too.

"That's right. Everyone has to tidy up their futon and then we'll make breakfast."

They had to occupy the kitchen before Sayako-oba-sama, lest their breakfast become lunch or dinner.

"If you'd like, Yoshino-chan, we could have soba or udon. What do you think?"

Sachiko-sama asked of Yoshino-san alone. It was the dinner menu they'd rejected earlier.

"... No, that's okay."

Yoshino-san had jumped on board with Sayako-oba-sama's proposal simply because she didn't want to eat leftovers, not because she was desperate for noodles.

"Then how about the more traditional New Year's foods, like mochi rice cakes and zouni soup?"

"I suppose."

The pair of third-years discussed tomorrow morning's breakfast, still standing atop their futons.

"There's still some prosciutto left over from the sandwiches I made, and there's plenty of eggs, so we could do bacon and eggs."

(Uh, you don't cook prosciutto, onee-sama.)

Just as Yumi was thinking how much of a waste this would be, Rei-sama said, "We could just have the prosciutto as is."

"It feels like that might be lacking some vegetables, though. Although it does match the New Year's colors of red and white."

"Ah, in that case, I could make a radish salad. I saw it on TV earlier."

"Rei ... "

Sachiko-sama muttered. She didn't say anything else, but the continuation was probably, "You'd make a good housewife." Yumi thought so too. Everyone would surely agree with that.

"Any objections?"

Rei-sama asked, now that their conversation had ended. It was just like home room. Since no-one raised their hand, the menu for tomorrow's breakfast was decided.

Sachiko-sama set the alarm clock then turned off the lights. The hands of the clock informed them that it was just after 11.

Without taking a vote, the lights were dimmed low. It was hard to see in the gloom, but Yumi and Sachiko-sama were probably the only ones smiling.

"Night."

"Good night."

Yumi pulled the blanket up to her neck and moved her pillow into a comfortable position, then groped around for her treasure ship beneath it.

Don't worry, it's there. Since she'd gone to the effort of making a charm to bring her pleasant dreams, it'd be annoying if it went missing due to her tossing and turning in the night, so she placed it inside the pillow cover.

Turning to the left, she could see the back of Rei-sama's head. Yumi idly thought, "I guess she sleeps on her side."

Turning to the right, there was Noriko-chan's profile.

Even though she usually seemed so mature, her sleeping face looked very young.

Although there were plenty of people in different grades at school despite their birthdays being only a few days apart. Yumi was born in April, so she was at least a year older than Noriko-chan.

One year, it was a remarkable thing. She'd seen one year old babies, and they were already capable of walking and saying words. That was how much development could happen in a year.

Noriko-chan's sleeping face looked so innocent, even though she was her friend's petit soeur. If that had been her own petit soeur, what would her feelings be?

Even though thinking about it wouldn't help anything.

If her rosary had been accepted back then, that may have been Touko-chan sleeping beside her. These thoughts came to her unbidden as she looked at the sleeping face of Touko-chan's classmate, Noriko-chan.

Shimako-san had Noriko-chan by her side, and when Spring came it looked as though Yoshino-san might finally get Nana-chan by her side. It would be good if Touko-chan was by her side.

She didn't even have to be smiling. She could be sulking, or looking stern, or acting un-cute.

Either way, as long as it was Touko-chan, it would be good.

She'd been expecting it, but Touko-chan made an appearance in her first dream of the year.

Outside the window of Yumi's room was, for some reason, Touko-chan's room. The pane of glass separating their rooms had clouded over.

Yumi wanted to see Touko-chan's face, on the other side of the glass. No matter how hard she wiped, she could only clear half of the cloudiness of the glass.

Even though it was completely unscientific, inside the dream, Yumi understood.

"So that's it."

Since both of the rooms were inside, the glass wouldn't clear up unless Touko-chan also wiped clean her side.

"Touko-chan, wipe clear your side."

Yumi pleaded.

But Touko-chan didn't respond. Yumi could definitely see the shape of someone that looked like Touko-chan, but they didn't utter a word.

"Hold on a minute," would have been fine. "I don't want to," would have been fine too. Yumi just wanted her to say something, anything.

Since she wasn't saying anything, there was no hint as to how Touko-chan was currently feeling, or what she was thinking.

"Touko-chan."

She must have made some mistake.

How could she find out what it was?

Yumi kept wiping clean her side of the glass as she cried. That way, there was still the chance that some day the other side of the glass might miraculously clear up.

As she single-mindedly wiped at the glass, Yoshino-san and Shimako-san appeared.

"What are you doing, Yumi-san?"

"Uh, nothing."

Yumi hastily jumped away from the glass and pulled the curtain closed.

"It was nothing."

"Really? Then how about we continue the party?"

The pair smiled as they pulled Yumi by the hand, saying, "Come on."

"Uh."

Looking over her shoulder, there was the Rose Mansion. But it was a strange space, with parts of the Ogasawara's Japanese-style room mixed in – like the flower alcove and the tatami mats.

It was hard to tell if the party was for Christmas or the New Year. Even the participants – Sayako-oba-sama was there but so too were Nana-chan and Tsutako-san. Naturally, she could also see the faces of Sachiko-sama, Rei-sama, and Noriko-chan.

"Come on, have a seat. Everyone's been waiting for you, Yumi-san."

"Ah, but I – "

Have to wipe away the window. Besides.

"What's the matter?"

"... Nothing."

She'd have liked to invite Touko-chan, if possible. But with the window closed, she couldn't call out to her.

What on earth should she do? She couldn't even wipe clean the window, let alone open it.

"Let's sing, Yumi-san."

"Ah, okay."

Yumi looked at the curtain covered window.

She was probably still there.

If so, may she remain as oblivious as possible to the lively party taking place here.

– In her dream, this is what Yumi prayed for.

The Heart in the Frosted Glass

Part 1

At 6:30 the following morning they were woken by the alarm clock and, while rubbing their eyes, they stood on their futons and Rei-sama led them in a round of radio calisthenics.

Sachiko-sama didn't like it, but since the other five were doing it she apparently didn't want to be the odd one out and reluctantly joined in.

"Did you have your first dream of the year?"

Naturally, this was the first topic of conversation that morning. However.

"I sort of did, and I sort of didn't."

"I dreamed that I ate so much I couldn't move."

"I think I had a dream but I can't remember it now that I've woken up."

Surprisingly, that was how it was. Dreaming about one of the lucky omens, like Mt. Fuji or falcons or eggplants, seemed to be about as unlikely as winning the lottery.

They walked through the house together in their light sleeping clothes, then brushed their teeth and washed their faces before getting changed.

Shimako-san swiftly dressed herself in her kimono, like she was putting on regular clothes. It seemed that she was so used to this that she didn't even need to make use of a full-length mirror. Sachiko-sama wasn't wearing her kimono today. She was dressed simply in a sweater and skirt.

After they'd finished dressing they split into the cooking group and the cleaning group. The former was made up of the two third-years, while the latter comprised the second- and first-years.

The cleaning group folded up the futons then tossed the sheets and pillowcases into the washing machines before cleaning the room.

Normally the tatami mats may have been swept clean of stray tea leaves with a broom, but they weren't sure so they decided to give it a quick clean

with the vacuum cleaner. It'd be bad if they messed up by doing something they weren't used to.

"Just that room's fine."

Sachiko-sama called out from the kitchen.

"Oka~y."

But it was kind of fun, so Yumi and her comrade-in-long-pants Yoshino-san raced each other in cleaning the long hallway.

As Shimako-san tweaked the ikebana display in the alcove, an enticing aroma wafted in from the kitchen.

"Itadakimasu."

When Sayako-oba-sama joined them, the seven of them started breakfast. At 7:30am.

The breakfast menu:

A clear soup made from chicken stock with a grilled mochi rice cake for each of them. The color of the Japanese parsley, wheat balls and mushrooms made it look quite pretty.

Fried eggs and non-fried prosciutto (Was it okay to call this Bacon and Eggs? ... It was a bit of a quandary.)

Finally, Rei-sama's red and white radish salad.

It was a mix of eastern and western cuisines but there were no complaints once they started eating.

"There's soy sauce, salt and pepper, Worcestershire sauce, ketchup, and mayonnaise. That should be enough to suit everyone, right?"

Rei-sama said, lining up the condiments she'd gathered from the kitchen on the table.

"As they say, to each their own."

Referring to how they seasoned their eggs.

Sachiko-sama reached for the soy sauce, and Yoshino-san for the ketchup. Rei-sama for the salt and pepper, and Noriko-chan for the Worcestershire sauce. Shimako-san took the soy sauce after Sachiko-sama,

while Sayako-oba-sama seemed to be amusing herself by trying the mayonnaise for a change.

"What about you, Yumi-chan?"

Rei-sama asked, having noticed that Yumi hadn't reached out for any of the containers.

"Ah, I'm still trying to decide which one to have."

If she wanted to have the same as Sachiko-sama, it would be soy sauce. But there was also the option of trying something different, like Sayako-oba-sama.

"Which one of these do you have at home?"

"Well."

Which one of these, she'd asked.

"Wait, you can't mean ... "

At which point Rei-sama acted totally shocked.

"You have something that's not here?"

" ... Yeah."

Bingo. Although, naturally enough, she'd had eggs with ketchup or Worcestershire sauce when she was a child, but, unfortunately, she'd been having them with something else almost exclusively of late.

"Is it a special sauce? Or is it a household staple?"

Yoshino-san leaned forwards, her excitement gushing out.

"A staple, but ... "

"Is it vinegar?"

"No."

Yumi shook her head, and Shimako-san and Noriko-chan joined in.

"Is it salad dressing, perhaps?"

"Is it kimchi stock?"

" ... No, it's neither of those."

Salad dressing was one thing, but what family would have a supply of kimchi stock on hand?

"Don't tell me it's miso soup?"

That would be something. It didn't sound like it would taste that bad, but wouldn't the egg be more of an accompaniment to the soup than the other way around?

Sachiko-sama had been listening quietly but she finally got tired of waiting and said:

"Stop acting so self-important and just say it already."

Yumi hadn't meant to be acting self-important, but it was hard for her to say what it was now that it had turned into such a big deal.

"Well ... it's **mentsuyu** sauce."

"Mentsuyu sauce!"

Everyone else cried out in unison.

"Mentsuyu sauce, huh?"

"I suppose we'd probably have that at home."

No-one had guessed it, but they all responded favorably.

"Sachiko-san, we have some in the refrigerator."

"Yes, we do. If you're alright with store bought sauce."

As she responded to her mother, Sachiko-sama finally looked at Yumi.

"Ah, of course."

The stuff they used in the Fukuzawa household had been bought from the supermarket in a "one-per-customer" special sale. She remembered being pressed into service to line up at the register because her mother had to have two bottles of it.

The bottle Sachiko-sama retrieved from their refrigerator was the same brand as Yumi's house used, but a size smaller. It seemed surprising that they would use something simple like this on their fine white noodles in the Ogasawara household, but the truth was apparently something else.

"Grandpa doesn't like noodle broth that doesn't have dashi, so the chef uses this to add some flavoring."

After taking the offered bottle, Yumi basked in everyone's attention as she poured the sauce over her egg yolk. Now the conversation turned to how they ate their eggs. Whether they attacked the egg yolk first, or saved it for

last, or ate the white and yellow parts proportionately, or whether they usually had it cooked on both sides. From there it moved on to how they preferred the egg yolk. Then it broadened from just themselves, as they discussed the preferences and idiosyncrasies of other people they knew, and the dining table became quite lively.

Fried eggs was such a simple dish, but it was funny how it brought out the eater's personality.

Part 2

They chatted and enjoyed a leisurely breakfast, then cleaned up, hung the linen out to dry once the washing machine finished, had a nice tea break, and by then it was already 11am.

"I suppose we should be heading off soon."

Rei-sama broached the topic and the two day New Year's party was brought to a close.

"You don't have to be in such a rush."

Sayako-oba-sama said, looking a bit regretful. Yumi felt the same way too, but Sachiko-sama's father and grandfather were returning that evening and the house staff would probably be back before then, so it seemed like they'd become a nuisance if they stayed too long.

"Come and visit us again."

Sachiko-sama smiled.

"Okay."

Her words had probably been intended for everyone but Yumi answered the loudest.

"Ah, wait a minute."

As they were putting on their shoes in the entry, Sayako-oba-sama scampered up to the second floor and quickly returned with something wrapped in a furoshiki cloth.

"Yumi-chan, you forgot something."

"I did?"

That said, she was definitely carrying her packed shoulder-bag. The presents she'd brought when she arrived had mostly been eaten, but even if there were leftovers she wouldn't have taken them home.

"Here you go."

Sayako-oba-sama opened the furoshiki cloth slightly to show what was inside. Yumi recognized the paper case. It contained the kimono of Sayako-oba-sama's that she'd been allowed to wear last night. Yumi remembered

taking it off prior to her bath and that Sachiko-sama had hung it up on a special kimono hanger.

"You can wear it with obi sashes and accessories you have at home."

"Ah, but."

"Don't be so modest. This is the prize for winning the game of sugoroku. If you like it, please take it."

"Wha-!?"

This was the first she'd heard of that.

"I'm sure I told you that. I did, didn't I?"

Sayako-oba-sama asked for confirmation. Yumi answered, "No," but the Yellow and White Rose soeurs all answered, "Yes."

"Huh?"

Why were there two different answers?

With question marks flying around Yumi's head, Sachiko-sama smirked and said:

"You and I were on the second-floor when she announced the prize, Yumi. Mother made the announcement as soon as Shimako-san and Noriko-chan returned. Completely missing the fact that we weren't present. Then father and Suguru-san appeared and she must have completely forgotten about it, right?"

"Yes, yes. That's it."

Sayako-oba-sama shrugged.

"It's folded over to make it easier to carry, unfold it to its normal size when you get home."

"... Is it really okay?"

For her to take something so expensive and laden with memories.

"Take it. I had one pushed onto me last night too."

Sachiko-sama said, as the other member of the winning team.

"Okay. Thank-you very much. I'll take good care of it."

Yumi accepted it with both hands, then bowed deeply. It would be a treasured heirloom, passed down to her children and grandchildren. That was how she felt. Even though she wasn't even married yet.

"You don't have to worry about returning the furoshiki cloth. It was the wrapping for a thank-you gift we received for attending a wedding ceremony."

Sayako-oba-sama gently tugged on the knot of the furoshiki cloth. The cloth was made from a thin felt-like material. When her father had attended a wedding ceremony in his hometown, he'd received a gift of red rice, grilled bream, and other things wrapped in a furoshiki cloth like this one.

"Ah. Is that the one Kashiwagi-san brought back?"

Rei-sama asked.

"Yes, that's right, it was when you were visiting. But there was something strange about Suguru-san that day. I was going to question him about it but I forgot."

Hmm, so some time in the past when Rei-sama was visiting, Kashiwagi-san had come over just to return this one furoshiki cloth.

"Huh, that's – "

She felt like she'd heard that story. Yumi cocked her head as she tried to remember, and Sayako-oba-sama said:

"Incredible, Yumi-chan. You remember the cloth? You're right, it's the one I wrapped Suguru-san's mille-feuille in back then."

"Ah, so that's it. I knew it."

Despite laughing and agreeing, Yumi thought, "That's not it." Sure, Kashiwagi-san may have received a package of mille-feuille wrapped in a furoshiki cloth like that one on the day of the amusement park date. But she'd completely forgotten about that.

She was stuck on something else.

One day when Rei-sama went to visit Sachiko-sama, Kashiwagi-san had shown up. Yumi hadn't been there, but she knew this.

(Ah.)

It was the day that Touko-chan had run away from home. Over the phone, Kashiwagi-san had told her about Rei-sama's visit.

Kashiwagi-san would surely have been acting strangely. Since he had to visit the Ogasawara household while Touko-chan was still missing and without turning it into a big deal. And, to this day, Kashiwagi-san still hadn't told the people of the Ogasawara household that Touko-chan had run away from home.

"What's the matter?"

"Ah, nothing. I was just thinking that since you gave me this kimono, I should learn how to put it on by myself."

Since Kashiwagi-san hadn't said anything, she should probably remain quiet about Touko-chan too. Having decided this, Yumi turned the conversation in a different direction.

"It's alright to get assistance with putting on a long-sleeved kimono."

Then Sayako-oba-sama said, "You seemed to enjoy it, so next time you visit we can try on kimonos." Trying on kimonos when she visited next. Incredible. That was different to "Wearing a kimono and visiting."

The five girls said their farewells to Sachiko-sama and her mother at the front door, turning down their offer of an escort to the gate, and headed out.

The weather was fine and it was pleasantly warm for January.

Ring-ring.

Yumi and the White Rose soeurs walked ahead, but Rei-sama and Yoshino-san quickly caught up with them, then overtook them, after first retrieving their bicycles from the car park.

"I'm off."

It was inevitable that Yoshino-san would enjoy herself on her shiny new bike. Rei-sama had temporarily stopped but she quickly took off again.

"Yoshino, wait up."

Rei-sama frantically chased after Yoshino-san. It was the same as always with those two. Yumi and Shimako-san looked at each other and laughed.

The gate was already open, since it was controlled from inside the house. Yoshino-san had been caught at the gate and was waiting for everyone else to arrive.

"Next up is the school opening ceremony."

"That's right."

"It's soon."

"Yeah. Real soon."

The five girls exchanged farewells of "Gokigenyou" and split into two groups.

Ahead of her, the two bicycles slowly shrunk into the distance. Yumi, together with Shimako-san and Noriko-chan, retraced the path they'd taken yesterday.

Since they didn't have to wonder about which road to take, they made it to the station in 15 minutes.

Part 3

They said goodbye to Shimako-san at the station, like when they met. Yumi got on the train with Noriko-chan and then they split up at M Station.

Yumi flopped down into a bus seat and looked out the window. Today was the third of January. She could still see people dressed in their finery here and there.

As she watched the scenery flow by, her thoughts turned to Kashiwagi-san for some reason.

When Touko-chan ran away from home, Kashiwagi-san had gone to the Ogasawara's house to find out whether or not she was there. Sayako-obasama had thought he was acting strange, and that was because he was hiding something.

That said, there had also been something strange about Kashiwagi-san last night.

If there was a reason for his "strangeness," then it seemed like it could be because he was hiding something from someone, like he had when Touko-chan had run away from home.

"I'm going skiing with my uni buddies from the morning of the fifth."

Nobody had asked him, so why had he said that?

"The winter break will be over by the time I return."

The winter break will be over. He would have been referring to his winter break, right?

But she'd heard that university holidays were much longer than high-school holidays. Nonetheless, he'd said that the break would be over by the time he returned. There's no way he'd still be blithely skiing when classes had already begun. Despite his appearance, Kashiwagi-san was surprisingly studious and it seemed rather unlikely that he'd make such rash plans with his university friends.

(Then whose?)

He wouldn't have been referring to winter vacation in general. That would have no bearing on Kashiwagi-san's ski trip.

(He couldn't be. ... No, I suppose he could.)

"So if there's anything you need me to do."

(Kashiwagi-san was telling me.)

As she thought about it, she came to understand. Kashiwagi-san's statements had seemed strange because they were directed at only one person.

No-one else knew that Touko-chan had run away from home.

"If you ask me about it next time, I'll tell you."

Yumi had asked Kashiwagi-san about the problems Touko-chan was dealing with.

It was a secret shared just by the two of them.

Therefore Kashiwagi-san had left Yumi with something like a code, so that none of the others would find out.

If she wanted to ask him about Touko-chan, she'd have to do it before he went away.

If she waited until he got back from his ski trip, school would have started. When that happens, she wouldn't be able to visit him whenever she wanted.

(He said the afternoon of the fourth.)

Yumi wrote the number "4" on the glass with her finger.

To ask about Touko-chan's situation or not to ask. She hadn't come to a conclusion just yet. It was scary to think about, so she'd put off making a decision.

So maybe it was a good thing for her to have a deadline placed on her decision.

When the name of the bus stop near her home was announced, Yumi pressed the buzzer and prepared to disembark.

(The afternoon of the fourth.)

She still had a whole day to think about it.

Part 4

Despite having time to think about it, there was no guarantee that she'd be able to collect her thoughts.

"You'll absolutely have to wear that kimono to your coming-of-age ceremony."

As Yumi idly listened to her mother talking about events three years in the future, more than half of her brain was occupied thinking about Touko-chan.

Why had Touko-chan fought with her parents?

It probably wasn't directly related to Touko-chan's rejection of her. But Yumi couldn't help but feel they were somehow connected.

Similarly, that glimpse of despair she'd caught on Touko-chan's face during their conversation about the blank map.

Or the question she'd thrown at Shimako-san about succeeding in the family business.

Yumi didn't know the reason why Touko-chan had refused the offer to be her petit soeur.

For example, Yumi may have been generally at fault just by failing to notice it. But if Touko-chan was in a poor state of mind, she couldn't help but wonder why.

Suppose that Touko-chan had come to feel that everything was futile, due to something at home, or some other reason. And then she'd suddenly been asked, "Won't you be my petit soeur?" Maybe she couldn't stand the thought of starting a new relationship.

Then wouldn't it be good if Yumi could find the crux of Touko-chan's troubles and resolve it? If she could, they could openly become soeurs, right?

She didn't know.

After all, she had no idea whatsoever what Touko-chan was worrying about. And she wasn't confident that she'd be able to talk to Touko-chan in an onee-sama-esque manner if she did find out.

In that case, she should ask Kashiwagi-san. That was why he'd set the deadline of the afternoon of the fourth.

Probably.

"Watch out, Yumi-chan, you're spilling it."

Deep in thought as she ate dinner, she knew she was making a mess around her plate.

"Yumi, if you're not reading the newspaper, pass it to me."

Deep in thought, not even the huge headline of the newspaper made its way into her brain.

"Ah."

Deep in thought as she took her bath, she applied conditioner before the shampoo.

Deep in thought when she went to change into her pajamas, she put on the pair of jeans that she'd just taken off.

Deep in thought – basically, she neglected all sorts of things.

Even when she went to bed, she couldn't fall asleep.

Even though she thought she'd have a whole day, tomorrow would soon be upon her.

Go to Kashiwagi-san's house.

Don't go to Kashiwagi-san's house.

One of the two. No matter which one she chose, night would fall again afterward. And she felt that when she went to bed tomorrow night, she'd think about the option she didn't take.

Due to all of this, she didn't get much sleep. But that didn't mean she overslept, she still woke up promptly at 7am.

Since she was on holidays, she wouldn't incur any divine wrath if she went back to sleep. But after lazing about in bed for half an hour, she got up. Because she knew that, in the end, her thoughts would keep wandering and she wouldn't get a restful sleep.

When she went downstairs, Yuuki was already there eating breakfast alone. Since they were on holiday, it was unusual for him to be awake before 8.

"Are you going somewhere?"

She asked, and Yuuki looked at her coldly as he ate his toast.

"A friend's house. I mentioned it at dinner last night. I guess you didn't hear."

"Really?"

Dinner, dinner ... She'd been so deep in thought that she made a mess around her plate, so obviously she hadn't heard a word that her brother had said.

"I'm done."

Yuuki put his hands on the table and stood up, then took his plate and cutlery into the kitchen. As he was leaving, their mom entered the room.

"Oh, good morning Yumi-chan. You're up early."

"... Morning. Where's dad?"

"He's already eaten and is shaving, since he starts work today."

"Hmm."

It was a small architectural firm so he only had the first three days of the year off, and was back at work from the fourth. But that said, the office wasn't open to others until January 5.

The window blinds were down, the doors locked, and the answering machine was on. Inside the closed office, their father was doing things like sorting the New Year's cards, checking email, tearing off the first 3 pages of the day-by-day calendar he'd just bought.

"I'm not cooking rice this morning, but I can make mochi rice cakes or toast. Which one do you want?"

Her mother asked, holding a pack of rice cakes in her right hand and a loaf of bread in its plastic wrapping in her left.

"Umm. I wonder which one I should have."

Yumi may have been influenced by what she'd seen her brother eating earlier, as she reached out for her mother's left hand, ie. for the loaf of bread. But a moment before she got there, her mother turned around leaving Yumi grabbing at thin air.

"Ah, I can do it myself."

Her mom shouldn't be coddling her now that she was in high-school. Yumi chased after her, but her mom ignored her and started opening the bread bag and getting prepared.

"It's alright, go and sit down."

"But."

"I'd rather you sat down."

"Huh?"

"If you're anything like yesterday, you'll just burn the toast."

Apparently Yumi had come across as being a danger to herself and to others yesterday. Rather than coddling her daughter, her mom had simply been protecting their food.

"You've been spacing out ever since you got home. Well, I guess that's to be expected. The Ogasawara house is like a grand palace."

Her mom looked at her as though she was suffering from jet-lag. But it was probably only natural that she'd think that, since Yumi hadn't told her anything about Touko-chan or Kashiwagi-san's promise.

"Um, but I've had a night's sleep, so I'm fine."

Yumi clasped her hands together in front of her chest, making an appeal that she'd recovered.

"You're fine, huh?"

Her mom chuckled then gave Yumi a light push on the shoulder, driving her out of the kitchen.

"At any rate, I'll make the toast for you."

Before Yumi could ask, "Why?" the answer came from behind her.

"I couldn't leave that to someone who's mis-buttoned the shirt she's wearing beneath her sweater."

"... Ah."

Since she had no response to that, Yumi decided to sit down and wait for her toast.

Part 5

All through the morning she went back and forth over this matter but couldn't come to a conclusion, so she decided to head out since all she could do at home was worry.

"Oh, where are you going?"

Her mom was listening to the morning news as she ironed.

"I haven't decided."

That was what she truly felt. She might go to Kashiwagi-san's place, or she might just walk around the block.

"What about lunch?"

"I'm not hungry."

That was true too. Her body may have been hungry but her mind was filled with thoughts, so she wasn't interested in eating.

"I wonder if you're sick."

After temporarily returning the iron to its stand, Yumi's mother walked over to her and placed her hand on her forehead.

"There's no fever."

Since her mother had been using the iron, her hand was much warmer than Yumi's head.

After confirming that Yumi's recent absentmindedness wasn't due to a fever, her mother quickly gave her permission to head out.

"Okay then. But take this with you."

She was holding out a box of almond chocolates.

"Even if you're not hungry now, you might feel like something while you're out, right? Before you start staggering and fall down, you can eat something sweet."

"Okay. Thanks."

Regardless of whether she'd eat it or not, she expressed her gratitude and put it in her bag.

Yuuki had snuck out at some point without Yumi realizing it. She asked her mom about it and was told that he left the house at 10am.

"You'll be back for dinner, right?"

"Of course."

Even if she collapsed, she should be able to get back by then.

"I'm heading out."

"Take care."

Just as she was at the gate, she saw the old lady that lived next door.

"Such good timing. Can you give this circular to your mother?"

"Uhh."

Even though Yumi was heading out, she didn't have a fixed destination so it wasn't like she was in a rush, so she said, "Okay," and took the piece of paper.

"It's dangerous these days. I wonder if I should get your father to make sure my house is safe."

Yumi had no idea what her neighbor was talking about, so she gave a business-like smile and said, "I'm sure he wouldn't mind."

As Yumi went back to her house, she glanced over the flier which was from the neighborhood association. In amongst things like reports on the association's activities, rules for taking out the trash, and upcoming events for the next three months was a notice from the local police station.

"There's been a spate of local robberies."

The lady next door had probably been referring to this. By a safe house, she probably meant one that was hard for robbers to break into.

"Mo~m. There's a circular from the neighborhood association. I'm leaving it here."

Yumi called out, after opening the front door.

"Oka~y. Tha~nks."

Her mother had gone back to the ironing and was probably in the middle of something, as she just called out in response.

"It's dangerous, huh."

Yumi was a bit concerned since she'd just been told this, so she took her house key out of her bag and locked the front door before heading out.

She peeked into her father's office from outside, but she couldn't tell what he was doing. Light was leaking out between the blinds, so he was probably doing some work in there.

Yumi thought it was a bit similar to the frosted glass. If her father opened the blinds a bit right now, she could wave and say, "I'm heading out." She felt vaguely disappointed about it.

After walking a little way she got on a bus.

Arrived at the station.

Got on a train.

Little by little, she was drawing closer to Kashiwagi-san's house. She hadn't yet made her decision. But despite this, the distance between them narrowed minute by minute.

She got off the train and got on a different bus.

What should she do? If she got off here, she'd be almost at Kashiwagi-san's house. As she was thinking this, the bus stop's name was announced.

There was a phone box next to the bus stop where she got off.

Should she call Kashiwagi-san's cell phone? She only pondered this for a little while. By all rights, that was the polite thing to do when visiting someone's house.

But she didn't. Despite drawing near to Kashiwagi-san, she still hadn't made her decision.

Even after coming all this distance, she wasn't leaning towards asking about Touko-chan. Instead, now that she was here, it was about fifty-fifty.

She could have mulled this over at home. But if she came to a decision that evening – say she decided to go ahead and ask, she wouldn't be able to get here before nightfall.

So she'd closed in on him, so that she could act immediately if she came to such a decision. And even if she decided not to proceed, all she had to do was go home.

That said, she couldn't vacillate forever. She probably couldn't stand in front of someone else's house for an hour or two.

What if she arrived at Kashiwagi-san's house like this? At that moment, Yumi decided she'd press the intercom button.

Despite having been there once before (and even then she hadn't been alone, she'd been with Yuuki), she quickly remembered the way to Kashiwagi-san's house.

The ten minute walk seemed neither long nor short and she soon arrived at her destination.

In front of that recognizable house, Yumi took a deep breath.

Finally, she had arrived.

The massive wooden gate was wide open. As though waiting for an expected visitor.

Inside the gate was that marvelous garden. At the end of the stone path was the front door.

She quickly found the intercom. Yumi brought her index finger up to the call button.

If she pressed that, Kashiwagi-san would come out. Then she'd have to ask him about Touko-chan.

Her finger shook. Even though she'd decided to press the button earlier, she couldn't do it.

She wanted Touko-chan to be her petit soeur.

She wanted to know everything about Touko-chan.

She wanted to take Touko-chan by the hand.

In that case, she should reach out her finger and summon Kashiwagi-san immediately. Call him and request, "Please tell me."

(But ... !)

Just before her mind short-circuited from overthinking, a cool breeze suddenly blew through it.

Was this really okay? Her voice whispering this in her mind was strangely composed.

She wanted Touko-chan to be her petit soeur.

She wanted to know everything about Touko-chan.

She wanted to take Touko-chan by the hand.

But those were all feelings from Yumi's side.

(In that case, what about Touko-chan?)

Was she thinking that she wanted to be Yumi's petit soeur?

Did she want Yumi to know everything about her?

(I don't know.)



That was a matter for the other side of the frosted glass.

Yumi brought her left hand up and used it to pull her frozen right hand down. She'd realized that asking Kashiwagi-san would be equivalent to forcing open Touko-chan's closed window from the outside.

That was something she couldn't do. If she did that, she felt like Touko-chan would close her heart even further.

Someone who would do that was not an onee-sama.

They would have no right to be called by that name.

Yumi turned on her heels and walked away.

After taking a couple of steps, she turned back and looked at Kashiwagi-san's house. There was a second-floor window right at the spot where she was looking. There may have been someone there, but Yumi couldn't tell from her position.

Yumi retrieved the chocolates from her bag, popped one into her mouth, and started walking towards the bus stop.

Reflected by the glass window, the afternoon sun was dazzling.

Afterword

Have you ever had the same song running through your head over and over again without being aware of it?

Hello, this is Konno.

Background music that runs through your head and when you notice it, it's like, "Again?" It's completely different to unintentionally replaying a song you love, happening before you're aware of whether you like or dislike it, as though the song has hijacked the broadcasting system in your skull and is having its way with your mind. Of course, sometimes it can be a song you love too. Either way, when you notice it, the thought of "Again?" is often accompanied by "Why this song?"

It could be something you hear on TV frequently, like a song used in a commercial, or a golden oldie on the radio, or sometimes it's a song that you hear someone on the street humming as you pass them.

Well, usually there's something that sets it off. But if you're unaware of what, and suddenly find yourself hearing that song, you'll think "Why?"

The reason I mention this is because I've had a song running through my head the entire time I've been writing this manuscript.

If you think you know which, you're probably right. That song is, undoubtedly, "Ruby no Yubiwa."

"The other side of the frosted glass"

... Aargh, it's no good. Now the intro's running through my head, just from that.

For the last few years, I haven't been listening to music when I work (unless it's to drown out some outside noise) so when I get a song stuck in my head it's quite hard to get it out.

When I was working on the manuscript, the background music seems to disappear. But when I start to forget, it comes back without warning. For instance, when I'm washing the dishes, or having tea, or climbing the stairs.

I'd been thinking that this time was particularly amazing, but recently "Ruby no Yubiwa" has been playing in a TV commercial (in March 2006). Ah, that's why~~

Of course, that song has nothing to do with this volume's subtitle. It's simply a coincidence.

The initial reaction to the subtitle had been, "It's a bit long, don't you think?" but after talking about this and that with my editor I couldn't come up with an alternative so we decided to go with it. I thought, "It's long, it's long," but there have been even longer ones in the past.

Incidentally, on the topic of getting rid of a song that's stuck in your head. The quickest method is to forcibly overwrite it with another song. It's not too hard, a simple song is best. So that even when you hear it playing, you're not bothered by it. Instrumental songs are better, but they don't take hold as easily. When there's an opening, fill it with another song.

Then, before I knew it, I had a song other than "Ruby no Yubiwa" repeating in my head. But both songs shared a common feature in their first line. The key words "frosted glass."

Right, the correct answer was "Sazanka no Yado" ... an enka song.

I think it's only people of my generation that would hear that and think, "Right, right, right, right!" Probably.

For all the young people saying, "I've never heard of those songs," (and since this is a Cobalt publication, there's probably a lot!) try asking an adult near you. Both songs were big hits, so they might be able to sing those lines for you. If they sing the whole song, lucky you.

Now then, as for the topic of this volume's story.

Last time, Yumi was rejected by Touko, and this story begins immediately after that. Then they ring in the New Year. It doesn't go as far as the third-term opening ceremony, so I guess it's roughly a "Winter Vacation Story." (uhh ... is that a bit too rough?)

Speaking of New Year's games, generally you'd think of things like kite flying (although fried octopus sounds so good its got my stomach rumbling),

Japanese badminton, and spinning tops. But, Yumi and the girls get up to none of these. It seems like they'd be able to fly a kite in the garden of the Ogasawara estate.

The penalty for losing at Japanese badminton was having someone write on your face in ink, so that might be a bit rough. They'd end up dirtying their best clothes.

Spinning tops. This was pretty popular way back when I was in elementary school, and I spun the top (a normal Japanese one) numerous times, but I don't think I could do it nowadays. I've lost the knack of spinning it. It's a bit of a digression, but I think I could probably still walk on stilts after all these decades. Ice skating too – after a little while wobbling around by the handrail, I think I'd remember how to do it. Of course, I'm just talking about regular ice skating.

Back to the story.

Yumi's New Year (ah, there might be some spoilers here, so if you're bothered by that and haven't read the book yet, skip over this section).

Elegantly, they played the 100 Poets again this year. With the characters of my story going all out for the cards, if I joined in I'd probably come last. It'd be completely impossible for me to reach for the bottom card after only hearing the first line of the top card.

Every year, there's a report on the 100 Poets Competition on TV (itself a fixture of the season), and it's so quick, so fast. It seems impossible for a human. Less "picking up" and more "grabbing." Every part of their brain must be running at full speed. Since they have to deduce the bottom half from the top half, find where that card is, then grab it. All at hyper-speed. No way I could do that.

Even though I tried my hardest to memorize the poems from 100 Poets when I was in school, I've forgotten pretty much all of them except the major ones. Huh, the major ones? That's how I've thought of them. But it's not like I've taken a survey, so now I'm starting to lose confidence.

The spring has passed and the summer comes again; For the silk-white robes // So they say, are spread to dry on the "Mount of Heaven's Perfume." (Empress Jito)

When I look up at the wide-stretched plain of heaven, is the moon the same // That rose on Mount Mikasa in the land of Kasuga? (Abe no Nakamaro)

Color of the flower has already faded away, when in idle thoughts // My life passes vainly by, as I watch the long rains fall. (Ono no Komachi)

In the peaceful light of the ever-shining sun in the days of spring, // Why do the cherry's new-blown blooms scatter like restless thoughts? (Ki no Tomonori)

– There.

Those were my major ones from the 100 Poems. How about you? Does that match up with your major ones?

Right, right. Apart from the major ones, there were other poems that had a major impact on me when I was younger.

At the present time, since I could bring no offering, see Mount Tamuke! // Here are brocades of red leaves, as a tribute to the gods. (Sugawara no Michizane)

I found that last line, "As a tribute to the gods (Kami no mani mani)" so hilarious that I'd roll around laughing. But that was when I was at the age when even the slightest things seemed funny.

So with that, this volume's afterword begins and ends on the subject of "verse."

Konno Oyuki.